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Greater Chaco Coalition Celebrates New Path Forward for Landscape Protection

President Biden and Secretary Haaland Offer New Promise to Finally Address Legacies of Sacrifice Zones and Environmental Justice for the Greater Chaco Region

Counselor, NM: Members of the Greater Chaco Coalition are applauding President Joe Biden and Department of the Interior Secretary Deb Haaland's [announcement](#) to finally address environmental justice and meaningful tribal consultation for the Greater Chaco region by launching a new collaborative landscape level planning process in 2022 with Tribes, elected officials, communities, and stakeholders.

For over a century, the federal government has quite literally treated the Greater Chaco Landscape like a national energy sacrifice zone. The region has been victim to large-scale resource exploitation, and a colonial history of Navajo displacement and land dispossession which has carved the landscape into a complex checkerboard of federal, state, private, and Navajo allotment land. Today, more than 91% of available lands in the Greater Chaco area of northwestern New Mexico are already leased for oil and gas, as a recent boom of industrialized fracking has made New Mexico the second biggest oil producer in the United States, now [responsible for nearly half](#) of all federal extractive emissions.

Since 2015, and long before, the [National Congress of American Indians](#), the [All Pueblo Council of Governors](#), [Navajo Nation](#), and [Greater Chaco Coalition members](#) have [called for an end](#) to unchecked oil and gas extraction in the Greater Chaco region and for the Department of the Interior's Bureau of Land Management and Bureau of Indian Affairs to make good on their [promise](#) of meaningful landscape management. Federal and state agencies continue to fail in considering [Tribal-led cultural resource studies](#) and the cumulative effects of extractive industries on communities health and well-being, the cultural landscape, and the climate. [New fracking wells continue to be approved outside the buffer zone](#) and across the landscape.

Having previously [expressed concerns](#) over limiting the scope of protections to a 10-mile federal mineral withdrawal around Chaco Culture National Historical Park, the [Greater Chaco Coalition](#) continues to [call on federal agencies](#) to fulfil their promises to address environmental justice and the cumulative impacts of oil and gas in the region. The proposed withdrawal today is but one piece of a larger effort to protect the Greater Chaco Landscape, as residents, Tribes, and Pueblos with cultural ties to the region have been experiencing the impacts of resource extraction for decades. Coalition members are calling today's announcement of a new process and [collaboration](#) a step forward toward finally ameliorating a legacy of broken promises.

Greater Chaco Coalition members look forward to engaging the Bureau of Land Management and the Bureau of Indian Affairs in agency discussions to begin to repair the longstanding damage that mineral resource extraction has wrought across the Greater Chaco Landscape and to create new frameworks that finally address the health, wealth, and wellness for the entirety of the Greater Chaco Region.

Statements:

Statement from the Honorable Chairman Daniel Tso

“For too many years, the Navajo Nation has been assaulted by waves of resource exploitation and legacies of sacrifice zones. Our work to protect the Greater Chaco Landscape started in earnest when seven matriarchs of the far-eastern Diné Counselor Chapter community demanded action be taken to stop the tsunami of new oil and gas that threatens the health, safety, and lifeways of the Diné people who live amongst these fracking monsters. Our calls echoed and we continue to build support to safeguard the living and ancient cultural landscape of the Greater Chaco Landscape.

From that call - Navajo Nation Chapter Houses, the Eastern Navajo Agency Council, New Mexico State Land Commissioner Stephanie Garcia Richard, Senator Tom Udall, Senator Martin Heinrich, Assistant Speaker and now Senator Ben Ray Lujan, Representative Raul Grijalva, Representative and now Secretary Debra Haaland, Representative Alan Lowenthal, Representative Xochitl Torres Small, President Jonathan Nez, The All-Pueblo Council of Governors, the National Congress of American Indians; and now President Joe Biden all have taken up the firebrand to *Protect the Greater Chaco Landscape*.

We owe so much to the matriarchs who first demanded action to stop the destructive oil and gas fracking. These matriarchs’ prayers and songs are what sustained us when our efforts to protect the communities got hard and complicated. It is with the deepest respect of these prayers that we continue the heartwork to adhere to the great natural LAWS to protect the Land, Air, Water and Sacred.

Today I applaud the great courageous action by the Biden Administration to protect the Greater Chaco Landscape, charting a new path forward for landscape management.

It is the hope of the people that these actions will chart the new way forward for Diné peoples’ trust and trustee relationships with the federal government, further action on the part of state governments, and finally address the cumulative and consequential impacts of mineral resource extraction.”

- Navajo Nation Council Delegate Daniel Tso, Chairman of the Navajo Nation Health, Education, and Human Services Committee

Diné Allottees Against Oil Exploitation (DAoX) Statement

“As Diné allotment holders, we and our heirs greatly welcome the action by President Biden to not just protect the 10-mile buffer surrounding the Chaco Canyon National Historic Park boundaries, but to protect the Greater Chaco Landscape in its entirety. Our rights as landowners, our trustee relationship with the federal government, as well as our communities’ public health has been greatly impacted by oil and gas industry fracking, alongside other extractive industries in the area, for decades. Because of the absence of free, prior, and

informed consent, nearly all of the rubber-stamping actions from federal management agencies across the Greater Chaco Landscape are textbook examples of the *absence* of meaningful Tribal engagement, and represent the *impacts* of environmental and institutional racism. We were not adequately informed and did not consent to more than 40,000 oil and gas wells that already litter the Greater Chaco region. The oil and gas industry is second to none when it comes to disrespecting Tribal communities, furthering institutional and environmental racism against our people and across this Landscape. Most reprehensible was the fact that federal agencies facilitated the destruction and contamination of our communities while a global pandemic raged. This federal racist injustice cannot be forgotten.

President Biden and Secretary Haaland's actions today start to turn this racist status quo on its head. We feel that the racial injustice that has been perpetrated on our communities has caused the coming of an unavoidable reckoning to the people who knowingly permitted the destruction of our communities. We can only have great pity and compassion for those people who worked so hard to destroy our lands and people, and we can only continue the generations-long work to console the hurt the Diné people have experienced.

With an ongoing 20-year long mega drought in New Mexico and current water resources being continuously drained to feed the oil and gas industry, we see the use of potable water for this industry as an extremely negligent misuse of this scarce resource and a very threat to our existence as an entire population here in the high desert landscape. Again, we were not informed, and we did not consent.

We as Diné Allottees Against Oil Exploitation are deeply aware that money is the most temporary thing in the world. What is forever will be a healthy land, sky, water and people.”

- Members Paul and Mary Ann Atencio, Allotment Land Owners, Lauren Howland and Alexander Howland, Allotment Land Owners, Samuel Sage, Allotment Land Owner

Diné CARE Statement

“President Biden’s promise to protect not just the Chaco Culture National Historical Park, but the Greater Chaco Landscape promises to end the practice of Diné communities serving as sacrifice zones for oil and gas ‘development’. By starting a new collaborative process to protect the Greater Chaco Landscape, we hope it is to ultimately protect the Environmental Justice communities in the Checkerboarded Eastern Navajo Agency. The communities of Counselor, Ojo Encino, and Torreon/Starlake have been on the frontline of a great struggle to address the public health impacts of oil and gas fracking across the landscape. These humble and resilient communities have made great sacrifices to share their stories and to resist the oil and gas juggernauts. These communities are heroes for their resiliency, and they deserve the highest respect, admiration, and gratitude for this step forward.

Diné CARE is blessed and honored to have partnered with these communities in their sacred struggle to protect Mother Earth and Father Sky. Diné CARE will always stand with the people who take action to protect the earth and the people. We can see that from now the work to have all stakeholders, including all sentient beings from the fungi, ants, aquatic species, elk and eagles, be represented when the time comes to develop landscape level management plans.

The people in the Greater Chaco Landscape live by this maxim: What you do the Earth; you do the people. Today President Biden is not just protecting and healing the earth and sky, he is

protecting and healing the people. We are most hopeful that this action is a turning point where the United States natural resource management planning philosophy focuses on the protection of all living beings.”

- Carol Davis, Executive Director, **Diné Citizens Against Ruining Our Environment** (Diné CARE)

Pueblo Action Alliance Statement

“Pueblo Action Alliance applauds the Biden Administration and Secretary Haaland for taking an active step to protect our ancestral homelands and address existing fossil fuel infrastructure. Bold actions like this are incremental to what is needed to address the climate crisis as the Southwest fights to protect water as a result of fossil fuel extraction. Real solutions like banning fracking and decreasing our carbon emissions are the bold actions being heralded by young people who want to see clean air and water in their futures. Not only to preserve cultural and ancestral history to the Pueblo people, but to begin processes that sever the dependency of oil and gas in regions where the federal fossil fuel leasing program has gone off the rails.

This announcement has only created opportunities for Indigenous communities to shape the future for the Greater Chaco region. Participation from frontline and Indigenous organizations will better shape long term plans for how the region is going to be managed. We hope that the participation from organizations like ours can help implement management practices that include community participation, tribal co-management strategies, and climate resiliency.

We’d like to also thank our Pueblo tribes who have advocated for our cultural landscapes to be protected through the federal trust responsibility. 20 Pueblo tribal nations have collectively worked to stop further expansion and have denounced resource extraction that threatened our cultural and traditional lifeways.

As a young Pueblo Indigenous organization, we have dedicated our efforts to educate our people on the impacts of fossil fuel extraction and further its social impacts. We manage stress and anxiety knowing that unless we take action to mitigate and adapt to climate chaos our futures would be grim. We have been watching what has been going on at COP26 and the response from young climate activists across the globe who have been all pleading that our leaders take bold climate action. Chaco represents both cultural and climate protections that speak to the Indigenous perspective that I believe Secretary Haaland understands. We pray this is real and we pray that this is meaningful for our futures.”

- Julia Bernal, Alliance Director, **Pueblo Action Alliance**

Additional Statements from Greater Chaco Coalition:

“Ahe’hee, Nitsaago La’ Hodzaa, Tse Biyah Anii’ahi’, hiha biki’ho’jish dliid. (Been Blessed and Survived). Thank you to all who worked on these efforts and for the accomplishments. Thank you to the Tri-Chapter, the Greater Chaco Coalition, Pueblo Action Alliance, and all others. Our efforts have been materialized and heard by the Great Spirit and the Powers at Be. We hope that future landscape planning efforts for the Greater Chaco Landscape consider our Diné-led Health Impact Assessment-K’é Bee Hózhqoogo liná Silá and other Tribal-led ethnographic studies. Ahe’hee.”

- **Diné Centered Research and Evaluation team**

"This landscape level planning process will build on the initial mineral withdrawal with the promise to ensure the Greater Chaco region is afforded complete protection from fracking. Now the real work begins!"

- Rebecca Sobel, Organizing Director, **WildEarth Guardians**

"Many of our local organizations have been part of consultation on the Greater Chaco landscape for a decade, often ignored by the agencies tasked with multiple use oversight. Industrialization of the landscape with oil and gas is incompatible with protection of cultural and heritage values, and living communities. The initiative to address existing energy development and long term protection of Chaco Culture World Heritage site will require complete reshaping of the missions of BLM and BIA in New Mexico."

- Mike Eisenfeld, Energy and Climate Program Manager, **San Juan Citizens Alliance**

"In initiating this process, Secretary Haaland and President Biden shone a light on vast concerns that have been raised for years about oil and gas extraction destroying this sacred landscape, living culture and communities. It is time to prioritize the people and cultural integrity of this region. We look forward to working with the Biden administration to ensure that the process, and future steps, center environmental justice and meaningful tribal consultation to protect public health and ensure broader landscape-level protections for the Greater Chaco region."

- Miya King-Flaherty, Organizing Representative, **Sierra Club Rio Grande Chapter**

"I applaud President Joe Biden's administration and Secretary Deb Haaland in this new concerted effort to address protecting our beloved Chaco Canyon and the Greater Chaco Region. It appears there is still more work to do, but I believe with the heart of the Greater Chaco Coalition and our allies, we can get it done and see true permanent protections for Seven Generations to come."

- Terry Sloan, Director, **Southwest Native Cultures**

"Action must align with the magnitude of the crises we face, and there is perhaps no better example where environmental justice, public health, and the climate emergency meet than in the Greater Chaco landscape. These sacred lands and communities have been sacrificed for generations through colonization and fossil fuel exploitation. Broader protections for Greater Chaco are long overdue, and we applaud the Biden administration for taking this important step toward justice."

- Kyle Tisdell, attorney and climate & energy program director for **Western Environmental Law Center**

"We applaud President Biden and Secretary Haaland's announcement to consider a 20-year withdrawal from oil and gas leasing and development within a 10-mile radius of Chaco Canyon, as well as the New Mexico State Land Office's decision to place a moratorium on new state mineral leases. This is a step in the right direction. As a law center that represents Indigenous clients, we firmly believe that consultation must be respected and become the norm for any development project on Indigenous lands or any project that impacts Indigenous communities. Meaningful consultation and co-management is long overdue. As the climate crisis continues as the most pressing issue of our time, we must collectively act with a greater sense of urgency to protect sacred sites, cultural heritage, and Mother Earth."

- Dr. Virginia Necochea, Executive Director, **New Mexico Environmental Law Center**

"We are excited that President Biden and Secretary Haaland are addressing the issue of gas and oil leasing in the Greater Chaco area. The consideration of a 20-year withdrawal within a 10-mile radius of Chaco National Historical Park is a wonderful start and we are especially excited about the initiation of a landscape-level management process! We still have work to do to address the existing impacts of oil and gas leasing and drilling for frontline communities. Tribal consultation is extremely important moving forward as fracking disproportionately harms indigenous communities. Environmental justice needs to always be at the forefront."

• Jenni Siri, **Frack Free Four Corners**

"President Biden and Secretary Haaland's announcement on the Greater Chaco Landscape is an important first step towards permanent protection. While there is still work to be done, these efforts to safeguard tribes and communities will be essential to protect the region from the disastrous effects of oil and gas development."

• Raena Garcia, Fossil Fuels and Lands Campaigner, **Friends of the Earth**

"By initiating a process to withdraw federal mineral and fossil fuel extraction and development activities around the Chaco Culture National Historical Park, President Biden is showing that he is committed to protecting Chaco Canyon's cultural importance to tribal and frontline communities, New Mexicans, and the country. We believe that Secretary Haaland's broader land management assessment of the region will show that further oil and gas development must be curtailed in lands nearby."

• Jorge Aguilar, **Food & Water Watch**

"Polluters have for too long had their way with this sacred region. Today's move is a good step toward more meaningful sovereign tribal government-to-government consultation and essential protections for this region in collaboration with frontline communities. We cannot afford to sacrifice regions like Greater Chaco to the fossil fuel industry if we want to try to avoid the worst effects of climate change."

• Alison Kelly, Senior Attorney for Lands, **Natural Resources Defense Council**

"This victory represents what can happen when people who care about the health of the land, air, water and the sacred remain committed to achieving justice for the greater good. Thank you to the unstinting efforts of all who cared about the Greater Chaco Landscape and most especially for the Elders' prayers."

• Evalyn Bemis, Photographer

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Miya King-Flaherty - Our Wild New Mexico Organizing Representative

(she/her/hers)

Sierra Club: Rio Grande Chapter

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