

Chaco Cultural Heritage Area Protection Act

Background

Chaco Culture National Historical Park, a national park and World Heritage Site (WHS), is known around the world for its still-standing, multi-story buildings and as the nerve-center of a culture that spread throughout and dominated the Four Corners area during the 9th, 10th and 11th centuries. This unique culture built hundreds of miles of roads and a network of villages, shrines and communications sites, many of which are still present on-the-ground. Many modern-day pueblos and tribes in the Four Corners area claim cultural affiliation with – and are descended from – the Chacoan people.

Chaco Canyon is located in the San Juan Basin, which has been one of the most productive natural gas basins in the United States for decades; and there may be oil resources near the park as well. The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) has already leased and allowed drilling on the vast majority - approximately 90% - of the basin's federal lands including several areas that overlap with Chacoan roads, villages and other highly significant resources. Fortunately, the lands immediately surrounding Chaco Canyon have not been intensively leased and drilled, yet, and are some of the last undeveloped lands in the San Juan Basin.

Why act?

For at least the past decade, pueblos and tribes in New Mexico and Arizona have been raising concerns about oil and gas drilling encroaching closer and closer to northwestern New Mexico's Chaco Canyon. It is estimated that there are over 5,000 artifacts within the greater Chaco region and possibly thousands more which have yet to be identified or disclosed. The Trump Administration is now proposing to issue new oil and gas leases in the landscape around Chaco Canyon, some that are perilously close to an important archaeological site that is part of the WHS designation. It is doing so over the objection of the All Pueblo Council of Governors (APCG), which represents the nineteen pueblos in New Mexico, and one pueblo in Texas, which [lodged a formal protest](#) against the proposed leasing decision. APCG has also [passed four resolutions](#) in recent years calling on BLM to stop issuing new oil and gas leases and permits near Chaco Canyon until new protections can be adopted through the ongoing land use planning process that BLM is jointly leading with the Bureau of Indian Affairs. The [Navajo Nation](#) and [National Congress of American Indians](#) have made the same request, which has also been [echoed by](#) Senators Udall and Heinrich and Congressman Ben Ray Lujan.

What does this bill do?

This bill would withdraw the minerals owned by the U.S. Government—and only the U.S. Government—from future leasing and development that are located within the *Proposed Chaco Protection Zone* [see attached map], which surrounds the Chaco Culture National Historical Park. This would protect the remaining Chaco ruins and landscape nearest the existing Park.

The *Proposed Chaco Protection Zone* is 909,000 acres in total area, but this legislation would only withdraw 316,076 acres of oil, natural gas, coal and other minerals owned by the U.S. Federal Government. The remainder of the minerals in this area are owned by private, state, and tribal entities and are not subject to the withdrawal. Existing federal mineral leases, as well as existing and future leases of state, tribal, and allottee minerals would not be impacted by this withdrawal. There are no development restrictions placed on this area in relation to other developments, such as roads or buildings.