

January 23, 2023

The Honorable Martin Heinrich
United States Senate
303 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Ben Ray Luján
United States Senate
498 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Teresa Leger Fernández
United States House of Representatives
1432 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515



Dear Senators and Representative,

As leaders of various community-based organizations and members of the Caja del Rio coalition, we are writing to express urgent concerns regarding the need for more responsible stewardship and permanent protection of the Caja del Rio; an area of profound cultural, historical, archaeological, and wildlife significance.

Over the past year, we have noticed an increase in several significant threats to the Caja's landscape, wildlife, and cultural resources including vandalism and defacement of sacred sites and petroglyphs, illegal dumping, theft of personal and government property, poaching of wildlife, illegal off-highway vehicle (OHV) use, and unlawful shooting. We write to share information that our coalition has collected and ask for your help in providing the necessary resources for an immediate response to these challenges.

Regarding vandalism and petroglyph defacement, in 2022 there were two major vandalism incidents occurring at the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) La Cieneguilla Petroglyph site. The first incident occurred around [January 18, 2022](#) and the second incident occurred on [October 19, 2022](#). Both incidents damaged irreplaceable cultural sites that are hundreds of years old. While these two incidents have received significant local and national attention, our coalition has also noticed an increase in vandalism including offensive graffiti and etchings throughout the La Cieneguilla site as well as the broader Caja del Rio.

While our coalition has sought to publicly promote more responsible stewardship of the Caja through [lifting up diverse voices in our community](#) to address these threats, we're concerned that BLM and the U.S. Forest Service lack the sufficient personnel and resources to adequately safeguard the area from future destruction. Additionally, some of our organizations have [provided reward money](#) for the apprehension of the suspect(s) involved in the January 18th,

2022 La Cieneguilla vandalism incident. Accordingly, we respectfully request an update on where this investigation currently stands. We also would like a timeline for when the necessary remediation and restoration of these vandalized sites will take place.

Members of the Caja del Rio Coalition have also witnessed a dramatic increase in the amount of illegal dumping and large amounts of trash being disposed of throughout the Caja del Rio plateau. Over the past few years, our coalition has removed more than 20 tons of trash including household appliances, large furniture, commercial building materials, and dangerous chemicals from the Caja del Rio. While our coalition has hosted numerous volunteer clean-up events to remove large piles of debris, we are deeply concerned by the increased volume and frequency of the dumping we are encountering on the Caja. While this dumping represents a serious threat to both human communities and wildlife, it also diminishes the area's historical, cultural, and spiritual significance.

Part and parcel to illegal dumping is wildcat and illegal shooting. It is not uncommon for individuals to dump everything from appliances and full paint cans to propane tanks and mattresses on the Caja and then proceed to shoot at them. We've found numerous incidents where petroglyphs have been shot at as well as irresponsible shooting taking place off the Caja's escarpments in the direction of historic villages and communities. In addition, we've encountered illegal poaching of wildlife ranging from [rare burrowing owls](#) to big game as well as livestock.

Members of our coalition have been working closely with various organizations including the BLM, New Mexico Department of Game and Fish, and Santa Fe County to address wildcat and illegal shooting in the area. One way to address this issue is to develop a new state-of-the-art and well-managed shooting range in the current area of the ad-hoc range off highway 54c. As a coalition, we have submitted comments during BLM's 60-day public scoping period discussing the potential for a new range and have been working with local communities that have been most impacted by the Caja's shooting issues. While we are encouraged by these recent steps, we also recognize that the federal agencies will need additional personnel and resources to make this range successful and to reduce future wildcat and unlawful shooting in the area. We want to strongly encourage BLM to continue to engage our coalition in this process as well as develop strong cross-jurisdictional collaboration with the Santa Fe National Forest, the National Park Service, the New Mexico State Land Office, the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish, the US Fish & Wildlife Service, the City of Santa Fe, Santa Fe County, and the adjacent Pueblos.

Regarding theft of government and personal property, we were discouraged to learn that five of the six cameras belonging to BLM monitoring the La Cieneguilla petroglyph site were recently stolen. This represents not just a significant loss to taxpayers, but also makes the area more vulnerable to future illegal activity. Similarly, over the past few years we have regularly encountered cars being broken into at the La Cieneguilla parking lot as well as theft of stock tanks to be sold for scrap metal.

Another major challenge facing the Caja del Rio is unauthorized OHV use. While our coalition supports responsible travel management and permitted use of authorized trails, we recognize that numerous unauthorized OHV trails are being carved into the Caja's landscape. These trails pose a threat to cultural and sacred sites as well as the area's wildlife and ecology.

While the Caja del Rio landscape is a place of healing for many individuals and groups in our communities, we recognize that this incredible landscape is also a place in need of deep healing. Accordingly, we are asking that the delegation take steps to permanently protect the Caja del Rio by providing the relevant federal agencies with the adequate resources and personnel needed to responsibly manage and steward the Caja del Rio. As indicated by the numerous examples cited above, more law enforcement and resource managers from BLM and the U.S Forest Service are needed to sufficiently patrol, monitor, and steward the Caja del Rio.

Thus, we respectfully ask that you prioritize the following actions:

- (1) Work closely with the leadership of the BLM Taos Field Office and the U.S. Forest Service Santa Fe National Forest to identify the specific personnel needs and costs to each agency and work in Congress to assure those specific resources are provided.
- (2) Provide an update from the relevant federal agencies on the status of the recent investigations of the La Cieneguilla vandalism as well as what tangible steps the BLM and U.S. Forest Service will be taking to address and mitigate the threats described above.

As one the most ecological and culturally significant landscapes in the American Southwest, every instance of vandalism, illegal dumping, poaching, wildcat and illegal shooting, theft, and unauthorized OHV use acts as a strong reminder of why the Caja del Rio needs permanent protection. We look forward to working with each of you to determine the most appropriate combination of administrative and legislative actions needed to help permanently safeguard this special place for future generations.

Thank you for your leadership on behalf of the people of New Mexico and we look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Andrew Black
EarthKeepers 360 and National Wildlife Federation

Garrett VeneKlasen
New Mexico Wild

Max Trujillo
Hispanics Enjoying Camping and Hunting Outdoors

Keegan King
Native Land Institute

Ralph Vigil
New Mexico Acequia Commission

Alexandra Merlino
Partnership for Responsible Business

Romir Lahiri
Conservation Lands Foundation

Carmichael Dominguez
EarthKeepers 360 & Former Santa Fe City
Councilor

Mark Allison
New Mexico Wild

Jesse Deubel
New Mexico Wildlife Federation

Gabaccia Moreno
Nuestra Tierra Conservation Project

Demis Foster
Conservation Voters New Mexico

CC:
Santa Fe County Commission
Santa Fe City Council

