

Chaco Canyon is Again Under Threat

Paul F. Reed, Archaeology Southwest



Fig. 1: Pueblo Bonito is the most prominent ancient structure in the Chaco Culture National Historic Park, with numerous kivas, circular ceremonial chambers used by different clans and spiritual brotherhoods

Photo: Wikipedia commons

One of our most beloved and special places — Chaco Culture National Historical Park — is once again threatened.

In late March and early April of this year, the Trump administration completed an extremely short 7-day Public Scoping period as it moves quickly to revoke the mineral withdrawal in the 10-mile zone of protection around Chaco Park and allow oil and gas drilling on Chaco's doorstep!

In October 2025, the administration initiated this action by announcing Tribal consultation on its proposal to reverse Public Land Order (PLO) 7923, which withdrew and put 336,400 acres surrounding Chaco Culture National Historical Park off limits to unchecked extractive mineral development for 20 years. If the Department of Interior (DOI) moves forward with its proposal, new oil and gas leasing and development on Federal lands will be allowed within 10 miles of the Park's boundaries — even on lands directly bordering the Park — threatening the irreplaceable sacred and cultural resources throughout the Greater Chaco Landscape.

The Greater Chaco Landscape includes Chaco Culture National Historical Park and thousands of archaeological and cultural sites, including great houses, small pueblos, roads, and special sites constructed by the ancestors of today's Pueblo people of

New Mexico and Texas, and the Hopi Tribe, as well as sites of continuing significance to the Navajo Nation and other Indigenous Nations. Chaco Canyon flourished as a major cultural and ceremonial center between 850 and 1250 CE, and its legacy remains central to the cultural identity, traditions, and ongoing practices of Indigenous peoples in the region. Chaco Canyon was designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site because the culture and heritage of the Indigenous peoples of the American Southwest are inextricably linked to the ongoing protection of the Greater Chaco Landscape.

The DOI is rushing to overturn protections and is giving the public only 7 days to weigh in. This hasty and deficient process stands in stark contrast to the robust public process used to create the withdrawal, which included 150 days for public comment, 8 public meetings, and 1.5 years of careful consideration. In addition to DOI's "preferred alternative," which would remove protections all together, the DOI has also proposed a second alternative that would reduce the size of the buffer around the park to only 5 miles.

Although only 15–20% of the area has been surveyed, archaeologists estimate that as many as 12,000 cultural sites and traditional cultural places lie within the 5-to-10-mile zone, all of which would be exposed to harmful drilling under this second option.

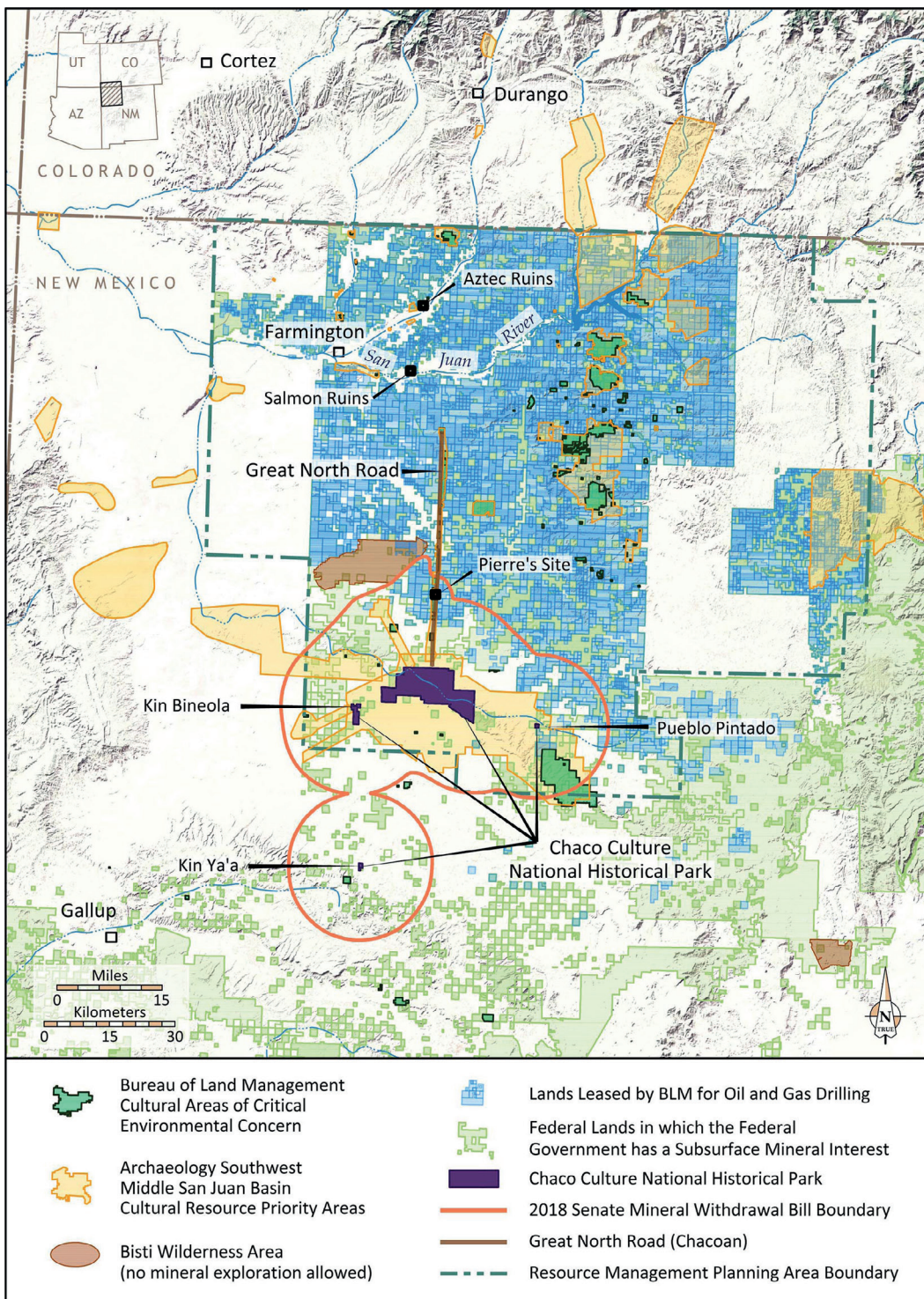


Fig. 2: Oil and gas development around the Chaco Culture National Historical Park and World Heritage Site. Map:ArcheologySouthwest

With nearly 90% of the region already leased before protections were put in place, intensive drilling has caused significant harm to the health of local and Indigenous communities, air quality, and cultural integrity in the landscape surrounding Chaco Culture National Historical Park. Oil and gas wells, roads, pipelines, and other infrastructure have destroyed significant cultural sites and transformed others into industrial wastelands. To allow more drilling in this area would completely disregard the calls from Tribes, including the 20 sovereign Pueblos that collectively participate in the All Pueblo Council of Governors,

the National Congress of American Indians, the Mescalero Apache Tribe, elected officials, and other communities who share a deep connection to Chaco Canyon.

Without this critical safeguard in place, the landscape is at great risk of being further degraded. The Greater Chaco region has already suffered from significant damage to air, water, and public health due to oil and gas extraction, and unrestrained oil and gas development will jeopardize the longevity of invaluable traditions and cultures.

This proposal is part of a much larger effort by the administration and DOI leadership to turn over public lands, including places with exceptional conservation and cultural values like the Greater Chaco Landscape, to the oil and gas industry. Already, the July 2025 federal budget reconciliation bill required the Bureau of Land Management to offer a staggering 87% of New Mexico's public and private lands with federally managed subsurface minerals for oil and gas leasing several times each year. This administration is seeking to elevate oil and gas above all other uses of public lands, even in areas with irreplaceable values like Chaco Canyon and where there is widespread opposition from local communities. A Colorado College poll which was released this year found that 71% of voters in New Mexico oppose allowing energy development on public lands near Chaco Culture National Historical Park.

The All Pueblo Council of Governors (APCG) has spoken out against this harmful action: "the All Pueblo Council of Governors strongly opposes the Bureau of Land Management's proposed revocation of PLO 7923 in whole or in part, and demands that the Department of the Interior immediately suspend all actions related to the revocation pending full, meaningful, and government-to-government consultation with affected Pueblos and Tribes." APCG Resolution 2025-07 (annexed).

U.S. Senator Martin Heinrich (Democrat – New Mexico), U.S. Senator Ben Ray Lujan (D-N.M.), U.S. Representative Teresa Leger Fernández (D-N.M.), U.S. Representative Melanie Stansbury (D-N.M.), and U.S. Representative Gabe Vasquez (D-N.M.) released the following statements regarding the Trump administration's new actions to eliminate protections for the Greater Chaco Region that safeguard the area from new oil and gas leasing, undoing a 20-year mineral withdrawal that has kept public lands surrounding Chaco Culture National Historical Park off-limits to new development.

"Chaco Canyon is one of the most important living cultural landscapes on the planet. It holds deep meaning for many communities and Pueblos across New Mexico. By wrongfully revoking Chaco's protections, the Trump Administration is hoping to allow new oil and gas development in the vicinity of Chaco Culture National Historical Park and the Chaco Canyon landscape. To deface and destroy this irreplaceable and sacred landscape is not only morally wrong: It is utterly disrespectful to the Pueblos, Tribal Nations, and New Mexicans who have called for permanent protection of the Chaco landscape," said the N.M. Delegation.

"We will do everything we can to get our Chaco Cultural Heritage Area Protection Act passed into law to permanently protect Chaco Canyon. This is not about the past; it is about the generations to come. And we stand united alongside everyone who believes that Chaco Canyon is a place worth protecting." (<https://www.heinrich.senate.gov/newsroom/press-releases/breaking-nm-delegation-con->

[demns-trump-administrations-move-to-begin-reversing-protections-for-chaco-canyon?fbclid=IwY2xjawN2-lhleHRuA2Fl-bQlXMQBicmlkETfzdWlsYzVJV3E5dj4WkowAR6BA9W7Zn-NWd5zZJTjNdsAIPDIta-H7IRIN4MRefUjzHla0GxFtYS6X-D41G_g_aem_lyMT3GnS_UQtcsJTYYQnLw](https://www.demns-trump-administrations-move-to-begin-reversing-protections-for-chaco-canyon?fbclid=IwY2xjawN2-lhleHRuA2Fl-bQlXMQBicmlkETfzdWlsYzVJV3E5dj4WkowAR6BA9W7Zn-NWd5zZJTjNdsAIPDIta-H7IRIN4MRefUjzHla0GxFtYS6X-D41G_g_aem_lyMT3GnS_UQtcsJTYYQnLw))

The scoping comment period, which ended April 7, was intended to identify issues that should be included in a forthcoming environmental assessment. Another comment period will open when the assessment is made available to the public, the agency said. It is evaluating three possibilities: leaving the 10-mile withdrawal zone in place; shrinking it to five miles around Chaco Canyon; or — the agency's preference — striking the protections altogether. As our Greater Chaco Coalition rallied supporters and generated more than 100,000 comments against this terrible action!



Fig. 3: Paul F. Reed and his wife Tristan Kwiecinski holding up placards in Taos, New Mexico, itself the location of a World Heritage property.

DOI is expected to announce the Environmental Assessment (EA) process under the provisions of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) in May and move to allow incredibly damaging oil and gas development on Chaco's boundary. This is expected to unfold under a very short 14-day comment period.

I am personally appalled that Secretary Burgum is moving to revoke the mineral withdrawal and put Chaco's 10-mile zone of protection and the Greater Chaco Landscape at risk. My wife and I walked the streets of Taos, New Mexico to rally support (Fig. 3). The amazing cultural heritage of Chaco Culture National Historical Park must not be compromised. As the process moves forward, we demand a full 90-day NEPA process with several public meetings, allowing the public to fully participate and make their feelings known.

Annex: Resolution 2025-07 of the All Pueblo Council of Governors



**All Pueblo
Council of
Governors**

Officers:

Dominic Gachupin, Chairman
Lt. Governor Craig Quanchello, Vice Chairman
Governor Cordelia Hooee, Secretary

RESOLUTION

ALL PUEBLO COUNCIL OF GOVERNORS RESOLUTION NO. APCG 2025-07

Acoma

Cochiti

Isleta

Jemez

Laguna

Nambe

Ohkay Owingeh

Picuris

Pojoaque

Sandia

San Felipe

San Ildefonso

Santa Ana

Santa Clara

Santo Domingo

Taos

Tesuque

Ysleta del Sur

Zia

Zuni

TO OPPOSE THE BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT’S INITIATION OF THE PROCESS TO REVOKE PUBLIC LAND ORDER NO. 7923, TO DEMAND SUSPENSION OF THE REVOCATION PROCESS PENDING GOVERNMENT-TO-GOVERNMENT CONSULTATION, AND TO REAFFIRM THE ALL PUEBLO COUNCIL OF GOVERNORS’ COMMITMENT TO THE PROTECTION OF THE GREATER CHACO LANDSCAPE

WHEREAS, the All Pueblo Council of Governors (APCG) is comprised of the Pueblos of Acoma, Cochiti, Isleta, Jemez, Laguna, Nambe, Ohkay Owingeh, Picuris, Pojoaque, San Felipe, San Ildefonso, Sandia, Santa Ana, Santa Clara, Santo Domingo, Taos, Tesuque, Zia, and Zuni, and one Pueblo in Texas, Ysleta del Sur, each possessing inherent sovereignty and the authority to govern its own affairs; and

WHEREAS, the Greater Chaco Region, encompassing Chaco Culture National Historical Park (“Chaco Canyon”) and surrounding cultural landscapes, holds profound spiritual, historical, and cultural significance to many Pueblos and Tribes, including the Hopi Tribe, in the Southwest; and

WHEREAS, for more than a decade, the APCG has consistently acted to protect Chaco Canyon and the Greater Chaco Region, as reflected in prior resolutions including APCG 2025-02, 2024-06, 2024-05, 2023-08, 2022-06, 2019-10, and 2017-12, which collectively call for permanent withdrawal of federal lands from mineral leasing, completion of the Greater Chaco Resource Management Plan Amendment (RMPA), and passage of the Chaco Cultural Heritage Area Protection Act; and

WHEREAS, on June 7, 2023, the U.S. Department of the Interior issued Public Land Order (PLO) No. 7923, withdrawing approximately 336,404 acres of federal lands in an approximate ten-mile buffer area surrounding Chaco Culture National Historical Park from new mineral leasing and entry under the U.S. mining laws for a period of twenty (20) years, recognizing the cultural and environmental sensitivity of the area; and

WHEREAS, PLO No. 7923 protects valid existing mineral and leasing rights along with Navajo Nation’s and Navajo Allottees mineral and leasing rights;

WHEREAS, since December of 2019, Congress through appropriations legislation has also maintained a moratorium preventing new oil and gas leasing and development on federal land in the ten-mile buffer area; and



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WHEREAS, prior to the PLO 7923 the New Mexico State Land Office withdrew adjoining state trust lands within the same ten-mile buffer, as part of a cooperative framework of federal, state, and tribal protection; and

WHEREAS, PLO 7923 was initiated in full compliance of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act, the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), and the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA);

WHEREAS, on October 30, 2025, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Farmington Field Office issued formal written notice initiating a process to revoke PLO 7923 in whole or in part, citing Executive Order 14154 (“Unleashing American Energy”) and Secretary’s Order 3418, and proposing to revert management of the area to the outdated 2003 Farmington Resource Management Plan; and

WHEREAS, the BLM’s proposed preparation of only an Environmental Assessment (EA) is procedurally and substantively inadequate, as the revocation of PLO 7923 would reopen over 336,000 acres to new mineral leasing and mining, constituting a major federal action that may significantly affect the quality of the human environment; and

WHEREAS, under NEPA, such an action requires preparation of a full Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) to assess cumulative, cultural, and environmental consequences, given that the proposed revocation would materially alter and disturb landscapes of exceptional cultural importance; and

WHEREAS, the BLM letter announced an expedited process and 14-day public comment period without adequate prior government-to-government consultation, contrary to Executive Order 13175, the Department of the Interior’s Tribal Consultation Policy, NHPA, and the federal trust responsibility; and

WHEREAS, the timing of the BLM’s notice and proposed 14-day comment period coincides with an ongoing federal government shutdown that limits agency operations and communication, and may overlap with Pueblo leadership transitions in December and January, together preventing meaningful consultation and timely participation as required under Executive Order 13175, NEPA, and the Department of the Interior’s Tribal Consultation Policy; and

WHEREAS, proceeding with consultation or public comment during a period of government shutdown and tribal transition fails to provide the meaningful and timely engagement; and

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WHEREAS, the proposed revocation of PLO 7923 disregards the thorough procedural and guidance followed under FLMPA, NEPA, and NHPA with more than a decade of formal consultation and public record supporting the withdrawal, and exposes irreplaceable cultural resources to immediate and cumulative harm; and

WHEREAS, any attempt to revoke or reduce the withdrawal before completing an updated RMPA would return management to a plan that predates horizontal drilling and fails to account for the extensive oil and gas development, cumulative impacts, and updated scientific and cultural information that have emerged since the 2003 Resource Management Plan was adopted; and

WHEREAS, such an action would also disregard the Chaco Heritage Tribal Association (CHTA) ethnographic study, a federally funded study specifically done to address the absence of needed information in the records of the BLM, which provides a foundation for understanding the cultural significance of the Greater Chaco Region and should inform all future federal planning and decision-making; and

WHEREAS, the APCG finds that the BLM's action threatens to dismantle years of tribal, federal, and state coordination, undermines the integrity of the consultation process, and places the Greater Chaco Region at renewed risk from extractive development.

NOW THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED, that the All Pueblo Council of Governors strongly opposes the Bureau of Land Management's proposed revocation of PLO 7923 in whole or in part, and demands that the Department of the Interior immediately suspend all actions related to the revocation pending full, meaningful, and government-to-government consultation with affected Pueblos and Tribes; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that the APCG reaffirms its demand that the Department of the Interior restart and complete the Greater Chaco RMPA, incorporating robust tribal consultation, ethnographic data, and updated scientific analysis to ensure that any future management decisions are culturally and environmentally responsible; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that the APCG urges the United States Congress to expedite passage of the Chaco Cultural Heritage Area Protection Act to make the ten-mile buffer permanent, protecting the Greater Chaco Landscape from future administrative reversals; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that the APCG calls upon the New Mexico State Land Office and other state and local partners to maintain their protective withdrawals and to coordinate with the Pueblos in opposing the federal revocation effort; and

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BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that this resolution shall serve as a reaffirmation of APCG Resolution No. 2025-02 and as an urgent response to the BLM's October 30, 2025, action, declaring the proposed revocation an imminent threat to the cultural and spiritual integrity of the Greater Chaco Region; and

BE IT FINALLY RESOLVED, that the Chairman or his designee is authorized to take all actions necessary to implement this resolution, including transmitting it to the President of the United States, the Secretary of the Interior, the Director of the Bureau of Land Management, the New Mexico Congressional Delegation, and other relevant agencies and partners.

CERTIFICATION

We, the undersigned officials of the All Pueblo Council of Governors, hereby certify that the foregoing Resolution No. APCG 2025-07 was considered and adopted at a duly called council meeting held on the 14th day of November, 2025, at which a quorum was present, and the same was approved by a vote of 17 in favor, 0 against, 0 abstaining, and 3 absent.

ALL PUEBLO COUNCIL OF GOVERNORS

By: Dominic Gachupin
Dominic Gachupin, Chairman

ATTEST: Cordelia Hooee
Cordelia Hooee, Secretary

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