Justin S. Greene
Commissioner, District 1

Lisa Cacari Stone
Commissioner, District 2

Camilla Bustamante
Commissioner, District 3

SANTA FE COUNTY

Adam Johnson
Commissioner, District 4

Hank Hughes
Commissioner, District 5

Gregory S. Shaffer
County Manager

February 10, 2026

BY REGULAR MAIL

The Honorable Senator Martin Heinrich
United States Senate
303 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

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

The Honorable Congresswoman Melanie Stansbury
1421 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Congressman Gabe Vasquez
1517 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Congresswoman Teresa Leger Fernández
1432 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

SFC CLERK RECORDED 02/11/2026

Subject: Support for Permanent Legislative Protection Designation for the Caja del Rio

The Santa Fe Board of County Commissioners, representing the five districts in Santa Fe County and within and around the Caja del Rio Plateau, formally request that the Caja del Rio receive permanent legislative protection designation.

On multiple occasions, the Board of County Commissioners has passed resolutions supporting the preservation and protection of the Caja del Rio (e.g., Resolution No. 2005-76, Resolution No. 2019-144, and Resolution No. 2022-030). Compelling justification for permanent legislative protection is outlined below and in the attached fact sheet.

This extraordinary landscape is as ecologically diverse as it is historically and culturally significant to New Mexico, American Southwest and the US. It is imperative that we act swiftly to safeguard the Caja's future, especially at a time when public lands across the west are facing numerous threats of being sold off and privatized.

From the stunning vistas of Diablo Canyon to the ancient La Cieneguilla Petroglyphs, the Caja del Rio has long been a vital cultural, agricultural and spiritual site for Indigenous peoples. Since time immemorial, it has served as a place for ceremonial practices, hunting, and herb gathering. Extensive petroglyphs mark the historical and cultural use of the Caja over millennia.

Additionally, Hispano and Indigenous communities have used the Caja del Rio for centuries for religious ceremonies, grazing, firewood and piñón nut gathering, and hunting. It is a living historical time capsule. The Caja landscape fostered significant trade, beginning with Indigenous peoples. This continues as the area contains significant portions of El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro, the longest Euro-American trade route linking Mexico City to northern New Mexico. The impressive switchback road of La Bajada brought mercantilists, artists, and visitors to Santa Fe.

The 106,000-acre plateau is home to a rich diversity of plant and animal life. These ecosystems provide essential habitat for birds and wildlife, while also supporting vital ecological processes that sustain our land and water resources.

The Caja del Rio needs immediate permanent federal protection. The absence of this protection has led to environmental degradation, vandalism and desecration of sacred sites, and illegal dumping. This threatens the very fabric of this sacred and biodiverse landscape.

In developing federal legislation, we ask you to work with a coalition comprised of Tribes, Hispano villages, local and county governments, and the local communities who care for the protection of our public lands and have come together to support this effort. These are the people closest to the land and who know best what is needed to protect these sensitive areas. We ask you to honor the hard work of negotiation and collaboration that has led to this request for legislation.

This coalition of diverse stakeholders is ready and willing to work with Congress and this Administration to expedite this process and make sure that it reflects the unique needs of existing and traditional uses. This action will not only protect this culturally significant landscape for current generations but also ensure that these irreplaceable public lands remain in public ownership for generations to come. Thank you for your attention to this critical matter. We look forward to continuing the discussion and working together to protect the Caja del Rio.

Sincerely,

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COUNTY CLERK
KATHARINE E. CLARK
SANTA FE COUNTY NEW MEXICO

SFC CLERK RECORDED 02/11/2026

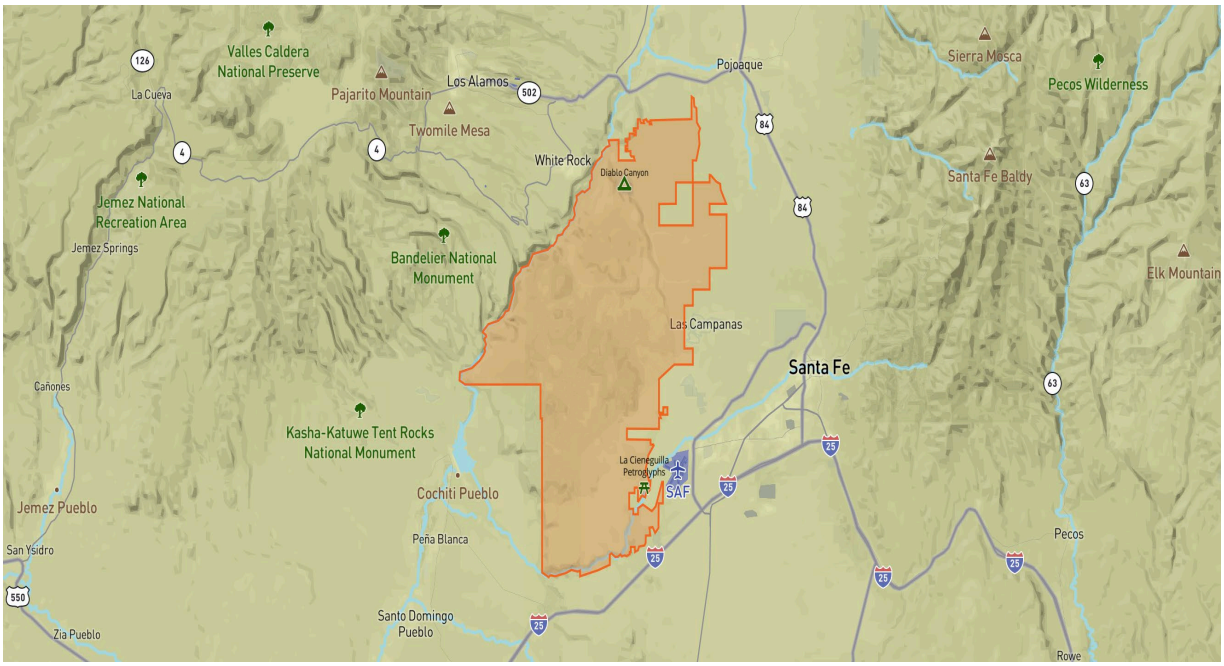
Caja del Rio National Monument
Legislative Fact Sheet

Purpose & Ask

Designate the Caja del Rio comprised of approximately 106,000 acres of public land in Santa Fe County, New Mexico, as a permanent federal protection of its ecological, cultural, historical, and recreational resources through collaborative stewardship.

Location & Scope

The Caja del Rio Plateau lies west of the Rio Grande and south of Santa Fe. The proposed monument includes lands currently managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and the U.S. Forest Service. These lands form one of northern New Mexico's most intact and resilient high-desert landscapes.



Ecological Significance

The Caja del Rio contains an extraordinary range of habitats, from upper Sonoran shrublands to alpine-influenced ecosystems. Ponderosa pine, piñon, and juniper forests give way to cottonwood bosques, basalt escarpments, cinder cones, and deep river canyons. The area functions as one of New Mexico's most important wildlife corridors.

Species include mountain lion, mule deer, elk, black bear, bobcat, burrowing owl, golden and bald eagles, and the Gunnison's prairie dog. Climate Atlas analysis places the Caja del Rio in the top 20% of all unprotected BLM and Forest Service lands nationwide for conservation value and climate resilience.

Cultural & Historical Importance
The Caja del Rio is a sacred and ancestral landscape for Pueblo and Traditional Hispano communities. It contains thousands of petroglyphs, petrographs, archaeological sites, historic trail corridors, and ceremonial areas. Prehistoric Pueblo villages once spanned the plateau, and the land continues to be used for ceremonies, prayer, and cultural practices.

Culturally affiliated communities include O'ga Pogeh and Cochiti Pueblo territories, San Ildefonso, Tesuque, San Felipe, Kewa (Santo Domingo), and Jemez Pueblos, as well as the traditional villages of La Bajada, La Cienega, La Cieneguilla, Agua Fría, Jacona, Cañón, and Tesuque. In 2021, the All Pueblo Council of Governors formally recognized the Caja del Rio as a traditional Puebloan cultural landscape deserving permanent protection.

Recreation & Public Access
The Caja del Rio offers extensive recreational opportunities, including hiking, horseback riding, mountain biking, wildlife viewing, rock climbing at Diablo Canyon, and spiritual reflection. Approximately 100 miles of mapped trails provide access while preserving the area's natural character. A National Monument designation would support equitable and responsible access for current and future generations.

Existing Designations & Need for Stronger Protection
Portions of the Caja del Rio already contain Areas of Critical Environmental Concern (ACECs), an Inventoried Roadless Area, and segments of El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro National Historic Trail. Despite these designations, current protections are insufficient to prevent habitat fragmentation, cultural resource damage, and incompatible infrastructure development.

Current Threats
The Caja del Rio faces imminent threats from proposed utility corridors, a 14-mile transmission line serving Los Alamos National Laboratory, and a controversial proposed highway. Additional pressures include illegal dumping, vandalism of sacred sites, unregulated shooting, off-road vehicle damage, wildlife poaching, and unmanaged recreation.

Why Permanent Federal Protection
Permanent Federal Protection would guarantee current and future traditional uses, local grazing practices, and community-based stewardship. Federal protection would formalize co-management with Tribal nations, Traditional Historic Communities, local governments, and federal agencies, ensuring long-term conservation, cultural preservation, and climate resilience.

Conclusion
The Caja del Rio is a living cultural landscape and irreplaceable ecological resource. Permanent protection is essential to safeguard its biodiversity, honor Indigenous and Hispano heritage, and ensure responsible public access. Permanent Federal Protection represents a timely, lawful, and community-supported solution.