



EARTHKEEPERS360

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Religious Leaders Across New Mexico Stand in Solidarity with Tribal Leaders to Protect Greater Chaco Canyon

Over 150 faith and religious leaders from throughout New Mexico have [signed onto a letter](#) calling for the continued protection of the greater Chaco Canyon landscape. Leaders from diverse faith backgrounds – including Christian, Jewish and Buddhist – are standing in solidarity with Tribal Leaders, including the [All Pueblo Council of Governors](#) and [Diné and Pueblo Frontline Community Leaders](#) to maintain protections for Greater Chaco Canyon. Chaco Canyon National Historical Park and the surrounding region is a living spiritual landscape, sacred to many Indigenous Peoples since time immemorial.

The letter urges Secretary of the Interior Doug Burgum to maintain the full 10-mile buffer zone around Chaco Canyon, which the Department of the Interior has proposed rolling back through a 14-day public comment period– a fraction of the 150 days, seven public meetings, and year-and-a-half of careful consideration allowed for public comment when the mineral withdrawal was initially considered and implemented under the Biden Administration.

“As people of faith, we believe responsible stewardship of sacred places is an important reflection of our religious traditions as well as speaks to our responsibility to future generations,” **said Reverend Andrew Black, Presbyterian Minister at First Presbyterian Church of Santa Fe & Founder of EarthKeepers 360.** “The 10-mile buffer protects more than 4,200 known archeological sites and ensures the protection of key wildlife habitat as well as protects clean air and water for the local communities.”

On July 15, the Department of the Interior [began a 14-day comment period](#) for the public to respond to the draft Environmental Assessment (EA) to revoke the mineral withdrawal for the 10-mile buffer zone. The EA states that complete revocation of the mineral withdrawal is the Department’s preferred action. Speaking to this, **Reverend Black** continued, “a short two-week public comment period to determine the future of an area of such profound cultural, spiritual and historical significance is hasty and short-sighted. Sadly, this comment period comes on the heels of a one week scoping comment period in April that the Department of the Interior launched

during Holy Week and over various religious, traditional and Tribal holidays. This remarkable landscape deserves – no, demands – more thorough, thoughtful and careful consideration.”

“For years, girded by prayer traditions, ancestors, and love of place, wise stewards have fought to protect what is greater than mere corporate profits: land, air, water, ecosystems, creatures, community, and the culture of Chaco. The draft EA significantly downplays the public health impacts to air, land, water, and community. As leaders of faith, we oppose the continued sacrifice of land and people for destructive development, when other opportunities to invest in the long-term well-being and economic development of the region exists” said **Desiree Bernard, Executive Director of New Mexico and El Paso Interfaith Power and Light.**

The BLM has already leased [over 90 percent](#) of the federal lands to oil and gas companies for drilling, resulting in over 37,000 wells and a sprawling network of 15,000 miles of roads that has turned many sites into industrial zones. Moreover, the public health impacts of these sites – polluted water, toxic air quality, and eroded land – have been disproportionate, [including to members of the Navajo Nation.](#)

Faith leaders say these impacts underscore the stakes:

“The Greater Chaco Canyon landscape has been held as sacred for more than a thousand years and the short-sighted whims of this administration's insatiable appetite for extraction cannot be allowed to prevail over current protections," said **Rev. Clara Sims, Minister First Congregational Church of Albuquerque and Assistant Executive Director of New Mexico and El Paso Interfaith Power and Light.** "As people of faith and conscience, we will continue to stand with the ancestors and present generations who are protecting this sacred and irreplaceable place."

Roman Catholic and Franciscan Nun Sister Joan Brown weighed in, saying "as Franciscans celebrate the 800th anniversary of the passing of St. Francis of Assisi, we are vitally concerned with the protection and care of the very sacred place of Chaco Canyon. In the past there was not always a consciousness of the sacredness of indigenous culture and sacred places and practices. Now it is imperative to work to protect and care for sacred places, the natural world and be in solidarity as brothers and sisters. The spirits of all of us are impacted by sacred places like Chaco."

Buddhist leader Nomi Green, dharma name: “True Source of Virtue”, Dharma Teacher in the Plum Village Community of Engaged Buddhism noted, “Chaco Canyon is a thousands years old site. We cannot afford to lose this site or compromise it.”

DOI is accepting comments on their proposal through July 29. The official project information from BLM can be found [here.](#)