

Who owns a mountain? The Sandias used to belong to Sandia Pueblo — now they want it back

Proposed legislation stirs debate about outdoor recreation, broken treaties and who gets to control public lands

BY GILLIAN BARKHURST
JOURNAL STAFF WRITER

The Sandia Pueblo wants to regain control of nearly 10,000 acres of public lands on the Sandia Mountains' western face, claiming that the U.S. Forest Service has failed to protect the nature and sacred sites there.

However, opponents, including

homeowners bordering the wilderness preserve and outdoor recreationists, said they fear the pueblo would strip away public access from nontribal members.

The proposed congressional legislation would move the wilderness trust from the Forest Service under

See **SANDIAS** >> **A8**



A cyclist rides near the base of the Sandia Mountains in Albuquerque on Thursday.

MIKE SANDOVAL/
JOURNAL

Albuquerque Journal, July 26, 2026

SANDIAS >>

From **PAGE A1**

the Department of Agriculture to the Department of the Interior, granting the pueblo management rights.

Sandia Pueblo Gov. Stuart Paisano said the pueblo would continue to allow outdoor recreation, only cracking down on uses that are already banned within wilderness areas, like off-roading and mountain biking.

For them, the act is a matter of protecting sacred lands, which they say are increasingly vandalized and restoring treaty rights broken by the federal government.

"That mountain belongs to us and we're trying to regain it through a transfer," said Sandia Pueblo Lt. Gov. Alex Lujan. "Nothing will change, but we want to get to a point where we can keep it pristine. It's too important to ignore and I think it's something that the public needs to understand — we're not taking anything away from them."

But for some, the pueblo's word alone isn't enough.

Jory Mayschak lives in Evergreen Hills, a neighborhood surrounded by the current T'uf Shur Bien Preservation Trust Area. She's lived there for seven years and raised her children with the foothills as their playground. Mayschak said her family uses the trails behind their house every single day.

Mayschak loves the Sandias and said she understands why the pueblo wants so fiercely to protect them.

"I visited here for the first time about 16 years ago and someone brought me up into the Sandias and I was like, 'This is the most magical place in the world,'" Mayschak said. "And to have a major metropolitan area with this massive wilderness right outside of it makes Albuquerque so incredibly special."

Mayschak said she and many of her neighbors were blindsided when they learned of the proposed land transfer about a week and a half ago, saying the

pueblo never notified them. She said the perceived lack of transparency has made it difficult for neighbors to trust the pueblo on good faith alone.

"I think it needs to be written into law in the same exact way that it was in 2003," Mayschak said. "So it needs to be guaranteed, continued public access and preservation of the wilderness nature."

The draft legislation obtained by the Journal writes that the act "does not include the roads, highways and public right-of-ways." However, the draft also doesn't specifically detail which trails are considered public rights-of-way, whether off-trail access is allowable or mention other forms of outdoor recreation.

When asked about the language, Paisano said the act amends the 2003 agreement rather than overhauls it.

"What it says is it transfers certain acreage and then it says everything else in the preservation act is left," Paisano said.

Still, Mayschak said she and her neighbors would want those assurances more explicitly written in the bill itself, leaving zero room for interpretation.

"I worry that this is precedent-setting and is not just applicable to New Mexico but actually could have ramifications across the U.S. and could be the beginning of the dismantling of our public lands," Mayschak said. "Which I know our current (presidential) administration is not opposed to and so I think that's incredibly scary to think about."

Mayschak and her neighbors aren't the only ones who are concerned.

On Friday, a website called Sandias For All popped up on the internet, imploring residents to call their representatives in Congress and oppose the act. It also asked residents to share their experience enjoying nature in the Sandia Mountains.

It is unclear who runs the new website, as numerous outdoor conservation groups in New Mexico denied involvement.



MIKE SANDOVAL/JOURNAL

The Sandia Resort & Casino sits near the Sandia Mountains in Albuquerque.

A long and complicated history

Long before the United States of America, the people of Sandia Pueblo lived in the shade of the Sandia Mountains. And long before those mountains were named by Spanish settlers for their bright red color, like a slice of watermelon sitting on the horizon, the Sandia Pueblo was called T'uf Shur Tia in the puebloans' native language, Tiwa.

When Spanish conquistadors arrived and imposed, often forcefully, the Catholic faith, most of New Mexico's pueblos fought back in a rebellion called the 1680 Pueblo Revolt. Historians consider the Pueblo Revolt to be the only successful large-scale Native American uprising to remove a European colonial power in North America.

But it was short-lived, lasting just 12 years before the Spanish reconquered the area. However, the revolt brought Spain to the table in negotiating land grants for each pueblo.

Those land grants formed the basis of treaties that both the Mexican and later the United States governments would agree to. Language from the original treaties was included in the famous Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which formally ended the Mexican-American War in 1848.

Decades later, when surveyors came to map and designate the pueblos' reservations under the newly signed treaty, the English version that guided them

didn't match the Spanish, Paisano said.

In the Spanish version, Paisano said the pueblo's lands extended all the way to the "sierra madre" of the Sandias, which translates literally to "mother mountain" but figuratively to "the highest peak." Instead, surveyors drew a straight line across the beginning of the Sandia foothills at the base of the mountain.

"They did the same to Isleta Pueblo and San Felipe Pueblo, whose boundaries were (later) corrected," Paisano said.

By the time the pueblo realized the error in old surveying documents, settlements and neighborhoods had already been built west of the legal boundary. A decades-long legal battle ensued, culminating in the 2003 T'uf Shur Bien Preservation Trust Area Act, sponsored by then-New Mexico U.S. Sen. Jeff Bingaman.

As written, that act was intended to protect wilderness while balancing both the pueblo's and the public's interests.

"(The Act) recognizes and protects in perpetuity: (1) the Pueblo of Sandia's rights and interests in such area; (2) the wilderness and National Forest character of the area; and (3) the public's longstanding use and enjoyment of the area," the 2003 act reads.

The act entrusted the U.S. Forest Service with managing the land, while Sandia Pueblo was given an advisory role. However, according to Paisano, the Forest Service hasn't held up its end

of the bargain.

Scrolling through photos on his phone, Paisano showed the Journal images of unkempt bathrooms, graffiti on rock faces and litter within the T'uf Shur Bien Trust. In one image, liquor bottles, plastic cups and beer cans scattered the parking lot of a trailhead.

"This isn't the hikers," Paisano said.

More worrying, he said, is vandalism and theft at sacred sites. Paisano alleges that pottery sherds and other archaeological artifacts have been stolen over the years.

"This is what is so disrespectful for us and how we look at this mountain," Paisano said. "It'd be like walking into a Catholic church or a mosque and spray painting inside of it."

Closing gates at sunset, like signage at the trailheads dictates, and having more law enforcement patrolling the area are simple solutions, Paisano said. But even after years of asking, Paisano said the Forest Service has not addressed their concerns.

"There are things that can help that will stop the destruction immediately," Paisano said.

With budget cuts to the Forest Service under President Donald Trump and Republican allies in Congress, Paisano worries that the neglect will only worsen.

The Forest Service declined to answer questions about conditions in the preservation area, instead saying in a statement Friday that "the Forest (Service) maintains open communication with the Sandia Pueblo Governor's office and communicates with them on a regular basis."

As for the draft legislation, the Forest Service "does not currently have a position."

From the neighboring homeowners' perspectives, complaints of destruction in the area feel overblown. Several homeowners said concerns they raised with the Forest Service were quickly dealt with.

That is not the pueblo's experience, Paisano said. The Forest Service not hold-

ing up its end of the bargain is just another example of the federal government breaking promises.

"It's sad when you hear that our word is not enough when the federal government should have done the right thing from the beginning," said Lt. Gov. Lujan.

Opinions on the Hill and at home

Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham, with less than six months remaining in her final term, gave her resounding support to the pueblo and its legislation in a letter to New Mexico's all-Democratic congressional delegation.

"This land transfer represents a meaningful step toward honoring our shared history while supporting responsible and sustainable land stewardship," she wrote in the July 8 letter.

Perspectives on Capitol Hill are more murky.

When asked if they would sponsor or support such a bill, Rep. Gabe Vasquez declined to comment. Both Rep. Teresa Leger Fernández and Sen. Ben Ray Lujan could not be immediately reached for comment.

As for Sen. Martin Heinrich, he hasn't decided yet, according to staffers.

"Senator Heinrich is reviewing Sandia Pueblo's proposal and appreciates hearing from all stakeholders," spokesperson from his office said in a statement.

Rep. Melanie Stansbury gave the most supportive response, though dodging the question of sponsorship. The Forest Service "has failed," she said, to fulfill their duties to the detriment of both the pueblo and the public at large.

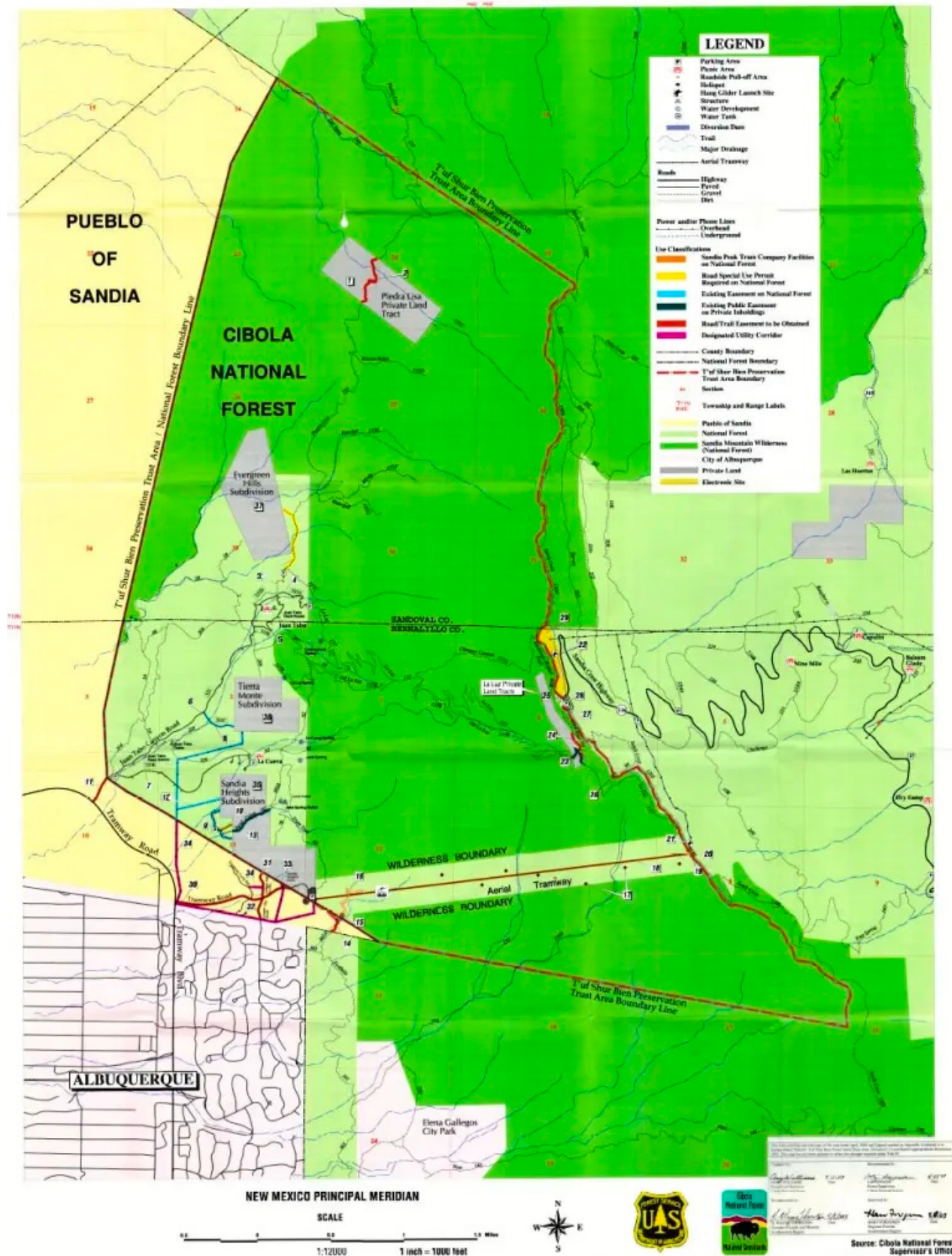
"It is imperative that the federal government come to the table and uphold its federal trust responsibilities to our pueblos and that our communities work together to collaborate, find common solutions and protect our sacred and public lands," Stansbury said. "That is the current discussion at hand."

Gillian Barkhurst is a general assignment reporter for the Journal. She can be reached at gbarkhurst@abqjournal.com.

T'UF SHUR BIEN PRESERVATION TRUST AREA

CIBOLA NATIONAL FOREST, SANDIA RANGER DISTRICT

April 2000





The west face of the Sandia Mountains in Albuquerque on Thursday. The Sandia Pueblo hopes to regain management authority over 10,000 acres in the Sandias, claiming the Forest Services has failed to protect nature and sacred sites. [Show less](#)

Mike Sandoval/Journal



A cyclist rides near the base of the Sandia Mountains in Albuquerque on Thursday. The Sandia Pueblo hopes to regain management authority over 10,000 acres in the Sandias, claiming the Forest Services has failed to protect nature and sacred sites. Some residents have expressed concerns that the pueblo would limit public access if proposed legislation was passed. [Show less](#)



Zane Cominek hikes at the base of the Sandia Mountains in Albuquerque on Thursday.

Mike Sandoval/Journal



The Sandia Resort & Casino sits near the Sandia Mountains in Albuquerque on Thursday. The Sandia Pueblo hopes to regain management authority over 10,000 acres in the Sandias, claiming the Forest Services has failed to protect nature and sacred sites.

[Show less](#)