

Sandia Pueblo will better care for the mountain we all rely on

BY STUART PAISANO

Local Column

Anyone who lives in or visits Albuquerque has looked east to the Sandia Mountains, which have watched over the Rio Grande Valley for millions of years.

Since time immemorial, the people of the Pueblo of Sandia have looked to the mountain, too — and not only for its beauty. The mountain has sustained our families and our community. It has provided flora, food, clean water and refuge. The mountain holds our most sacred shrines and special places where we collect resources necessary not only to our traditional religion, culture, language and history, but for other pueblos and tribes.

Just as the mountain has cared for us, we have prayed to and cared for the mountain. When we pray, we pray for the world: for the people and the animals, for long life and happiness.

For peace, for water, and for the sun, the moon and the stars.

We have prayed through centuries of challenges, including warfare and colonization by the Spanish, Mexican and United States governments.

In 1748, the western face of the mountain was among the lands

in 2003, Congress passed the T'uf Shur Bien Preservation Trust Area Act, which allows tribal members “free and unrestricted access to the Area for traditional and cultural uses,” protects private landowners living within the claim area, defends in perpetuity the wilderness character of the area, and prevents logging, mining and other development.

Today, we are asking the New Mexico congressional delegation to support our efforts to further protect the mountain, especially as we witness the mountain, waters and wildlife suffering in a warming world.

We are asking Congress to transfer land within the T'uf Shur Bien Preservation Area from the U.S. Forest Service, within the U.S. Department of Agriculture, to the Bureau of Indian Affairs, within the Department of the Interior.

We appreciate that many U.S. Forest Service employees have tried to protect this special area, but those efforts have fallen short. Anyone who visits can see graffiti, trash, destroyed cultural sites, deferred maintenance, broken fence lines and user-made trails. The Forest Service estimates that 23 miles of unapproved, user-created trails have been cut within the 10,000-acre area. Under the Wilderness Act of 1964, wilderness areas are meant to remain relatively free from human control while still allowing for public use and enjoyment, which can impact both biophysical and

efforts for emergency responses, public safety, wildfire and law enforcement.

The people of the Pueblo of Sandia have always been good neighbors. And we've been disheartened to hear disinformation about our request to the congressional delegation. We see how those words and images make our neighbors feel afraid.

We have met with and reassured neighbors, businesses and lawmakers to explain what this transfer means and how the pueblo will continue to care for the lands — just as we did for centuries before Spanish, Mexican and American settlers came to the Rio Grande Valley.

Often, when people call for the greater protections of New Mexico's lands and waters, they cite the traditional knowledge and long-term stewardship of Indigenous people.

Today, we're asking that all the people of the Rio Grande Valley learn our history, end the distrust and listen to our own words. Today, we're asking for the public to support our efforts to better care for the mountain we all rely upon, respect and love.

Stuart Paisano is governor of the Sandia Pueblo.

granted to the pueblo by the king of Spain. More than a century later, in 1858, the U.S. Congress confirmed those rights under the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and set the pueblo's eastern boundary at the "main ridge."

In 1859, however, a U.S. government surveyor walked the foothills rather than the ridgeline — and arbitrarily removed nearly 10,000 acres from the pueblo's land grant.

For decades, we tried to regain access to those lands and protect sensitive traditional areas. Finally,

social aspects of wilderness. For the preservation area, this also includes disruption of the pueblo's traditional and cultural uses, and its rights and interests in and to the area.

Despite what people might read online or see within their social media feeds, if the land is transferred, all authorized existing uses or activities and existing public rights of way for roads and utility corridors will remain. Visitors can still enjoy the mountain.

At the same time, the pueblo will be able to better protect the mountain from future development, further degradation and catastrophic wildfire. Rather than relying solely on funding and solutions from Washington, D.C., the pueblo will offer local solutions, resources and strategies tailored to the unique cultural and physical landscape of this area. With the transfer, the Pueblo of Sandia can also facilitate intergovernmental coordination