

Friends and colleagues,

Sandia Pueblo leadership is seeking federal legislation to strip away Forest Service co-management of 10,000 acres of designated Wilderness on the Sandia Mountains' west face and place the land in trust for the Pueblo, thereby providing the Pueblo with full governing authority over the land.

The proposal is described as an [administrative change](#), but its consequences are far more significant. It would fundamentally alter management authority, eliminate over 99% of public access, place the Wilderness designation at risk, and shift responsibility for law enforcement, wildfire management, and forest administration to Pueblo leadership—and away from the Forest Service, in perpetuity.

To summarize the situation: In 2003, Congress responded to Sandia Pueblo's ancestral land claims by granting the Pueblo significant authority over the west face of the Sandia Mountains. The resulting agreement established co-management with the Forest Service and gave the Pueblo "[exclusive authority to administer access to the Area for traditional and cultural purposes by Pueblo members](#)."

Pueblo leaders are now pursuing federal legislation that would replace this co-management framework and place the land solely under Pueblo control. They have argued that the legislation is necessary because the Forest Service "lacks the resources to manage the Sandia Mountain Wilderness." That claim deserves closer scrutiny. Recent agency restructuring designated Albuquerque as one of six national Operations Service Centers, and regional Forest Service staffing has been restored to historic highs.

The actual issue appears to be a breakdown in communication and cooperation between the Pueblo and the Forest Service. Repairing that relationship should be the immediate priority. The Pueblo's concerns about sacred-site protection, crime, enforcement, and land management deserve a serious response. They can be addressed through renewed consultation, improved cooperative management, stronger enforcement, and targeted protections.

Those concerns do not justify transferring the land out of the National Forest System, placing its status within the National Wilderness Preservation System at risk, and permanently eliminating more than 99% of public access. The better course is to restore a functional relationship between the Pueblo and the Forest Service and address the Pueblo's concerns within the existing legal framework.

We are a group of concerned citizens and organization leaders. We request that you, as organization leaders and individuals who may be affected by this proposed change, inform your constituents and begin disseminating information about what is happening. Share accurate information, encourage others to ask questions, and contact your elected officials. Ask them to restore negotiations between Sandia Pueblo and the Forest Service and to oppose the proposed transfer legislation.

This is not an administrative adjustment

The Sandia Pueblo leadership is seeking legislation to transfer the T'uf Shur Bien Preservation Trust Area (see attached map) to a federal trust for Sandia Pueblo, thereby granting the Pueblo full governing authority over the land. The current name of the proposed legislation is the "Pueblo of Sandia Land Transfer Act of 2026."

You may have heard the proposal described as "housekeeping," an "administrative shift," an effort to reduce crime and vandalism, or a straightforward way to protect sacred places. The justification being that the "Forest Service no longer has sufficient staffing, resources or funding to manage the Sandia Mountain Wilderness."

That description is intentionally misleading.

The legislation, as described, would not merely replace one agency's name with another's. It would reverse the foundational management framework Congress enacted in 2003, remove approximately 10,000 acres from Forest Service co-management, pull the land out of the National Wilderness Preservation System, place the land in trust for the Pueblo, and grant the Pueblo complete jurisdiction and decision-making authority over public access, recreation, closures, law enforcement, wildfire management, and cultural resource protection.

These questions affect far more than agency paperwork. They affect the future of the Sandia Mountain Wilderness and the relationship between Albuquerque, central New Mexico, and the mountain.

What Congress established in 2003

The 2003 [T'uf Shur Bien Preservation Trust Area Act](#) resolved a longstanding dispute over approximately 10,000 acres on the west face of the Sandias.

The settlement recognized and solidified Sandia Pueblo's ancestral, cultural, and religious relationship with the mountain. It strengthened the Pueblo's role in protecting sacred places and cultural resources. At the same time, the land remained within the Cibola National Forest and Sandia Mountain Wilderness, under Forest Service co-management with the Pueblo.

The settlement also protected other Pueblos' and the public's long-standing use and enjoyment of the area. Existing uses included hiking, running, birding, bicycling, hang gliding, bow hunting, backcountry camping, rock climbing, picnicking, cross-country skiing, botany, horseback riding, wildlife viewing, photography, research, educational activities like geologic excursions, organized events, spiritual pilgrimages, and many other established recreational, religious, and operational uses.

That balance was the heart of the agreement: cultural protection, wilderness preservation, and continued public use.

The proposed transfer would reopen that settlement and replace it with a fundamentally different arrangement.

Why the proposal is concerning

Sandia Pueblo leadership has raised concerns about the protection of sacred places, inadequate enforcement, and the maintenance and management of trailheads.

Those concerns should be addressed.

But correctable management problems should not be used to justify the permanent transfer of jurisdiction over the west face. Congress and the Forest Service can fund cultural site protection, provide dedicated law enforcement personnel, strengthen penalties for vandalism, improve wildfire planning, and co-manage specific areas to meet the Pueblo's cultural needs, all without ending public access or removing the land from the National Wilderness Preservation System.

The concern is not simply that management would change. The legal foundation for public access would change with it.

The Forest Service currently administers the area under the Wilderness Act, the 2003 settlement, and other federal public land requirements. Trust land, by contrast, is held and administered entirely by and for the benefit of the tribe. Unless Congress expressly preserves existing public uses and other Pueblos' access to their sacred sites, public access would be entirely at the discretion of Sandia Pueblo leadership.

Although the Forest Service has recently undergone restructuring, Albuquerque remains a key part of its structure, now designated as one of six national Operations Service Centers. In 2026, the agency added over 1,600 employees, primarily focused on recreation, restoring regional staffing levels to those of 2018. The Forest Service is adequately funded and staffed; the issues raised by the Pueblo do not indicate an incapacity to manage the area. Instead, they highlight that better communication and cooperation between the Forest Service and the Pueblo would effectively address existing unmet needs, demonstrating that collaboration is essential for sustainable management.

What could be lost

Sandia Pueblo leadership claims that familiar trails, trailheads, roads, and picnic areas will remain open under new legislation. However, this does not guarantee continued public access to the mountain. A corridor-based access model might safeguard La Luz, Piedra Lisa, and existing picnic facilities at these trailheads, but it would eliminate access to the remaining 99% of the land. This expansive landscape includes long-standing trails, ridges, canyons, scrambling areas, overlooks for artists and photographers, research and educational sites, sacred sites for various tribal and spiritual communities, and dispersed destinations.

Hikers and runners use these paths and ridge systems sustainably and responsibly, and they are vital to other tribal groups, photographers, artists, researchers, naturalists, hang gliders, rock climbers, educators, volunteer stewards, families, bow hunters, and numerous visitors. All these areas are outside the two designated corridors.

Without explicit statutory protections, these diverse uses would be left to the discretion of Pueblo leadership, which has clearly and repeatedly expressed its intent to end public access to the entire area.

Public safety and management questions remain unanswered

The proposed transfer also raises significant questions about law enforcement, wildfire management, emergency response, and public accountability.

If the Forest Service ceased to be a co-manager of the area, the role of Pueblo police would expand. As proposed, Pueblo police would patrol the west face, enforce access restrictions, issue citations, investigate offenses, and manage and enforce closures.

Wildfire prevention, fuels treatment, mitigation planning, firefighting, and fire closures would also move under the Pueblo's jurisdiction. That change would directly affect neighboring communities along the foothills.

The wilderness designation must remain intact

The proposed transfer area is congressionally designated Wilderness land.

The 2003 law expressly preserved the Sandia Mountain Wilderness and required continued administration under the [Wilderness Act](#). A new bill either pulls the land out of the National Wilderness Preservation System or designates its management by a tribal government, a move with no precedent within the Wilderness Preservation System.

A promise by the Pueblo that the mountain will remain “undeveloped” is not enough. Undeveloped land is not congressionally protected Wilderness. The Wilderness Act provides a distinct and enduring legal framework that must not be weakened through ambiguous language.

The better solution is to repair the partnership

The choice is not between neglecting sacred places and transferring the mountain.

A better path is available:

- Restore direct and sustained consultation between Sandia Pueblo and the Forest Service.
- Provide the Sandia Ranger District with dedicated law-enforcement capacity.
- Fund cultural-resource monitoring and protection.
- Improve wildfire mitigation and emergency-response coordination.
- Create a durable dispute-resolution process between the Pueblo and the Forest Service.
- Preserve the 2003 settlement, the Wilderness designation, and existing public uses.

The immediate priority should be to withdraw or decline to introduce the proposed legislation. Federal, tribal, congressional, and local leaders should then help the Forest Service and Sandia Pueblo return to the table and rebuild their working relationship.

What we are asking you to do

1. Discuss the proposal and share accurate information.

Please talk with friends, neighbors, colleagues, recreation groups, businesses, and community organizations about the proposed legislation and its potential consequences. Share reliable information, source documents, maps, and firsthand knowledge whenever possible. Encourage others to ask questions, verify claims, and participate respectfully in the discussion. Broad public awareness is essential to ensuring that any decision affecting the Sandia Mountains is transparent, informed, and responsive to everyone with a stake in the mountain's future.

2. Contact your elected officials.

Please contact the officials who represent your home address. Keep your message respectful, concise, and focused on restoring cooperation between Sandia Pueblo and the Forest Service.

U.S. Representative Melanie Stansbury, New Mexico District 1

Most Albuquerque residents are represented by Congresswoman Melanie Stansbury.

[Submit a message to Representative Stansbury](#)

Albuquerque office: 505-346-6781

U.S. Senator Martin Heinrich

[Submit a message to Senator Heinrich](#)

Albuquerque office: 505-346-6601

U.S. Senator Ben Ray Luján

[Submit a message to Senator Luján](#)

Albuquerque office: 505-337-7023

Albuquerque officials

Your Albuquerque city councilor

[Send a message to one or more city councilors](#)

Residents of the Far Northeast Heights and Foothills are generally represented by District 8 Councilor Dan Champine. The citywide form allows you to select Councilor Champine, your own councilor, or multiple councilors.

Albuquerque Mayor's Office

[Submit a message to the Mayor's Office](#)

Mayor's Office: 505-768-3000

Suggested requests

Ask each official to:

- Help restore relations between Sandia Pueblo and the Forest Service.

- Support mediated negotiations and stronger cooperative management.
- Oppose or decline to introduce the proposed transfer legislation.
- Ask the parties to resolve their concerns within the framework of the 2003 settlement.
- Provide additional federal resources for law enforcement, sacred-site protection, wildfire mitigation, and cultural-resource management.
- Preserve the Sandia Mountain Wilderness designation and its place within the National Wilderness Preservation System.
- Preserve all existing public uses protected under the 2003 legislation.

Please write in your own words and identify yourself as a constituent. Explain your personal or professional connection to the Sandia Mountains, but please avoid language that boycotts Sandia Resort & Casino, attacks Sandia Pueblo, tribal sovereignty, Pueblo culture, or the Pueblo's legitimate interest in protecting sacred places.

The central message should be: ***Oppose or decline to introduce the proposed legislation, restore the Forest Service–Pueblo relationship, protect sacred places, and preserve the Sandia Mountain Wilderness and existing public access.***

3. Help document what is at stake.

Organizations with knowledge of trail use, recreation, search and rescue, wildfire management, volunteer stewardship, tourism, public health, neighborhood safety, or the outdoor economy should compile relevant information. This evidence may be needed if legislation moves forward.

4. Join the Coalition to #SaveTheSandiaWilderness.

We are a group of concerned citizens, local business owners, recreationalists, neighborhood association leaders, and organization leaders. We need people who can assist with research, legal analysis, organizational outreach, neighborhood engagement, public safety, wilderness policy, communications, and relationships with elected officials. Help us continue organizing and working to save the Sandia Wilderness and public access to it.

Position of the Coalition to #SaveTheSandiaWilderness

Sandia Pueblo's cultural relationship with the mountain is real and deserves respect. Sacred places deserve meaningful protection.

This does not mean we should abandon the framework Congress established in 2003 or transfer the west face of the Sandia Mountains out of the National Forest System or the National Wilderness Preservation System.

The responsible path is to stop the legislation, repair the relationship, protect sacred places, strengthen management, preserve wilderness protections, and keep existing public uses secure under federal law.

Stop the transfer. Repair the partnership. Protect sacred places. Protect access. Preserve the Sandia Mountain Wilderness.

#SaveTheSandiaWilderness

Attachments:

Summary of some proposed legislative changes presented to the Sandoval County Commission by Sandia Pueblo leadership.

Map of land purported to be transferred to Pueblo.

Discussion draft and summary of proposed legislation provided to homeowner associations by Pueblo leadership.