James Melonas

Forest Supervisor

Santa Fe National Forest

11 Forest Lane

Santa Fe, NM 87508

**Re:** **Support for Recommended Wilderness**

I am writing to express my dismay with the Forest Service’s draft land management plan for the Santa Fe National Forest, and to emphasize the need to include additional protections in the final management plan for wilderness, particularly for the additions to the Pecos and San Pedro Parks Wilderness Areas and for an enlargement of the recommended wilderness area on the Caja del Rio Plateau.

Wilderness is the highest level of protection for our public lands and is designed to protect lands and wildlife in their natural state. While only Congress can designate wilderness, the Forest Service can recommend areas be designated for wilderness and protect the natural condition of the land in its land management plan. I urge the Forest Service to adopt the wilderness recommendations in Alternative 3. Specifically, the Forest Service should recommend the following areas in the Santa Fe National Forest’s land management plan: the Pecos Wilderness Area expansion (78,952 acres); the San Pedro Parks Wilderness Area expansion (5,808 acres); the White Rock Canyon Recommended Wilderness Area (19,259 acres); and the Ortiz Mountain Recommended Wilderness Area (10,157 acres). These places are among the wildest lands left in New Mexico, and they are ideal places to protect ecologically important, undeveloped lands. These areas merit this protection, and I urge the Forest Service to recognize their vital ecological, geologic, cultural, historic, and recreational value.

The Pecos Wilderness is a New Mexico treasure and home to some of the wildest places remaining in New Mexico. I am pleased that the Forest Service is proposing to recommend an expansion of this area but, with so much wild land remaining untouched, the Santa Fe National Forest should include all the recommended wilderness areas currently in Alternative 3. Recommending these additions to the Pecos Wilderness Area will ensure a connected corridor of wild lands for recreational enjoyment and wildlife protection. The Pecos contains critical habitat for Mexican Spotted Owl and the Holy Ghost Ipomopsis and is an important corridor along the migration path of many species.

The Caja del Rio, including White Rock Canyon and Ortiz Mountain, is a centrally-located and easily-accessed primitive area offering challenging backcountry recreation and enriching cultural interaction. The are has a rich diversity of petroglyphs and sits n the middle of a mosaic of federal, state, tribal, and private land. Protecting the area will ensure this area remains a linchpin for connecting the larger landscape. I am pleased that the Santa Fe National Forest’s preferred alternative proposes to protect part of the Caja Plateau as a wildlife and cultural interpretive area but the balance between this management area and proposed wilderness is better struck in Alternative 3.

Finally, the San Pedro Parks Wilderness Area is one of the most frequently visited wilderness areas in New Mexico drawing visitors from across the state and across the west. Recommending the western addition, which is targeted for oil and gas development, will offer more opportunities for solitude and primitive recreation.

In the face of ever-increasing threats of resource extraction and over-development, I implore you to safeguard these high value conservation lands now to protect our economy, natural heritage, opportunities for outdoor recreation, and livelihood for future generations. Please protect these priority lands in the Santa Fe National Forest by recommending more wilderness, particularly additions to the Pecos and San Pedro Parks Wilderness Areas, as well as recommending the Caja del Rio wilderness footprint of Alternative 3.

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