

## **Guest Editorial: New Mexico deserves wild, scenic Gila River**

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[http://www.dchieftain.com/opinion/editorials/guest-editorial-new-mexico-deserves-wild-scenic-gila-river/article\\_f5410a72-4840-11ea-b142-870143c4069b.html](http://www.dchieftain.com/opinion/editorials/guest-editorial-new-mexico-deserves-wild-scenic-gila-river/article_f5410a72-4840-11ea-b142-870143c4069b.html)

The time is now for U.S. Senators Tom Udall and Martin Heinrich to take a cue from community members in Grant County and introduce legislation designating segments of the Gila and San Francisco Rivers as Wild and Scenic

The Gila River has always had a special place in my heart. . As a kid, when I wasn't playing baseball, I spent a lot of time at the river with my family, fishing and playing in the water. When I taught at Silver High School, I observed firsthand how getting kids outside was really important to their physical and emotional wellbeing. Now, as a father of two young kids, I take them to the river whenever my busy schedule allows.

Wild and Scenic designations permanently protect American rivers with "outstandingly remarkable values" in their free-flowing condition. The Gila River and its watersheds and the wilderness it slices through support incredible biodiversity, traditional water uses and forms of outdoor recreation, and props up the region's growing outdoor economy. These features and more make the Gila and San Francisco ideal options to add to the nation's Wild and Scenic conservation system.

Designating nearly 450 miles of the Gila and San Francisco Rivers as Wild and Scenic is supported by over 150 small businesses in Grant County, private property owners, tribes, faith leaders, sportsmen, outdoor enthusiasts, and more. This diverse collection of stakeholders are encouraging Senators Udall and Heinrich to introduce federal legislation making this designation a reality. Both senators have strong conservation records and have signaled their intention to introduce Wild and Scenic legislation. Given the robust local support, I strongly encourage the senators to do so as quickly as possible.

It is worth noting that existing water and property rights would remain the same should these segments be designated as Wild and Scenic. Plus, traditional forms of recreation like hunting and fishing would be maintained and even enhanced given how Wild and Scenic designations help preserve critical habitats for wildlife. In other words, there does not appear to be an obvious downside to moving forward with this designation.

I am honored to serve alongside Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham, who understands the important role protecting our land and water plays in economic development in rural New Mexico. This is why she has signed legislation creating a division of outdoor recreation last year and recently announced her support for a Wild and Scenic legislation for the Gila and San Francisco. She understands like I do that such an action at the federal level would help enhance the outdoor economy in southern New Mexico similarly to how the outdoor recreation division will spur economic growth statewide.

The citizens of Grant County deserve to be applauded for their grassroots push to secure a Wild and Scenic designation for these special river segments. And Grant County Commissioners Chris Ponce, Harry Browne, Alicia Edwards, and Javier Salas deserve an enormous amount of credit for listening to their constituents and passing a resolution signaling the county's support for Wild and Scenic legislation. They showed tremendous leadership and knocked it out of the park.

I know Senators Udall and Heinrich intend to make a Wild and Scenic designation happen, and the people of Grant County will be forever grateful for their leadership once the legislation is introduced.