

# Ranch responds to Heinrich column

Michel Jichlinski — Project Director, Augustin Plains Ranch Apr 18, 2018

*Editor's note: This letter was written in response to Sen. Martin Heinrich's opinion piece that was published in El Defensor Chieftain on March 29.*

Dear Senator Heinrich: I was saddened to read the opinion published in *El Defensor Chieftain* on March 29. It appears that you may have been misled about the true nature of the project and of its current standing.

To begin with, I feel it is important you know that the current opposition to the project is not about saving a natural resource from the rapacious hands of an amoral billionaire. Instead its objective is to deny Augustin Plains Ranch, a corporate citizen of New Mexico for more than 40 years, of its right to a hearing as per the New Mexico constitution.

But worse yet, the opposition is depriving New Mexico citizens of a potentially game changing new water resource which would spur job growth and provide critical environmental relief to the Rio Grande.

Currently all the water used for the economy of the Rio Grande valley, which is by far the primary job creator in the State, comes directly or indirectly from the river. This has put enormous stress on the environment.

Several biological opinions clearly show that fish is endangered and wetlands are at risk. It is no secret that the water supply is under threat, and with it New Mexico's agriculture and industry. Global warming models point to a decrease in snowfall (It didn't snow this year). Texas is suing the state for a large amount of Rio Grande water and has already won several rounds in court.

Should these threats materialize, a large slice of the State's economy is at risk.

The continuation of the status quo will only set the state further back, at a time that it is lagging most other states in all economic indicators. What is true of New Mexico is true of Catron County. Between 2010 and 2016, the percentage of the population of the county that is 65 and over climbed from 28 percent to 38 percent, while that of those under 18 decreased from 16 percent to only 12 percent. There are no jobs, and families are leaving. Unless economic development takes place, the county will turn into a retirement home. Your initiative and support for the development of the Facebook data centers are a testimony to your commitment to the economic wellbeing of the state. But data centers and similar industries require cooling which, in turn, requires significant quantities of water.

Where is that water going to come from? New Mexico needs alternative and new water sources. At the same time, sound environmental management demands a decrease in the takings from the river. One way to do that is to better capture the precious rainfall that comes to the state. The Augustin Plains and the aquifer are both hydrologically closed. This provides a unique opportunity to enhance aquifer recharge and produce water without depriving downstream users. This is a major component of our proposal. The time has come for all citizens of New Mexico to leave ideology aside and create science based solutions to its water problems, involving the private and the public sectors and a bi-partisan approach to problem solving.

The project should indeed be scrutinized as the concerns of the local community should not be taken lightly. But squashing scientific discovery, which is the only purpose of the motion currently under evaluation by the State Engineer, is not in the interest of the citizens of New Mexico. I am more than happy to meet with you to discuss all of this in detail.