



SOCIETY FOR AMERICAN ARCHAEOLOGY

October 16, 2019

The Honorable Ben Rey Luján
Chairman, Subcommittee for Indigenous
Peoples of the United States
House Committee on Natural Resources
1324 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Luján,

I write today in support of the Chaco Cultural Heritage Area Protection Act (H.R. 2181). This legislation is badly needed in order to permanently protect the core of the Greater Chaco Landscape from new oil and gas exploration and drilling.

SAA is an international organization that, since its founding in 1934, has been dedicated to the research about and interpretation and protection of the archaeological heritage of the Americas. With more than 7,500 members, SAA represents professional archaeologists in colleges and universities, museums, government agencies, and the private sector. SAA has 512 members in Arizona; 393 members in New Mexico; as well as counting in our ranks archaeologists in all 50 states as well as many other nations around the world.

Chaco Canyon and its surrounding landscape are home to the irreplaceable physical remains of the Chacoan culture, a people that inhabited and thrived in the Four Corners region from approximately 850 CE to 1200 CE. Examples include great houses, villages, and an extensive network of roads that link Chaco Canyon with outlying areas. All of these places and the objects they contain are of paramount spiritual and cultural importance to the nearby pueblos and tribes that are the descendants of the Chacoan people. The awesome beauty and historical significance of the site have been affirmed by UNESCO and the US Department of the Interior. Chaco Canyon is a National Historical Park, and was designated a World Heritage Site in 1987. Each year, the New Mexico Wilderness Alliance tabulates more than 40,000 visitors and tourists visit the site, eager to see and learn about the area's pre-contact past.

Unfortunately, the current administration has, over the past several years, attempted to lease public land adjacent to Chaco Canyon for oil and gas exploration on multiple occasions. These leases were cancelled because of forceful objections from the All Pueblo Council of Governors, the Navajo Nation, Members of Congress, and preservation groups including SAA. Last May, the Department of Interior announced a temporary moratorium on leasing activities within 10 miles of the NHP.

We need a lasting solution to this situation. H.R. 2181 would permanently ban future lease sales on more than 300,000 acres of federal land within approximately ten miles of Chaco Canyon. It would parallel New Mexico's closure of state lands within 10 miles of the canyon to oil and gas leasing. Passing this measure that will forever protect the priceless cultural resources of the Chacoan people for the benefit of present and future generations.

SAA strongly supports the passage of H.R. 2181.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Joe E. Watkins". The signature is written in a dark ink and is positioned to the left of the typed name.

Joe E. Watkins, Ph.D., RPA
President