

Opinion: Chaco Canyon buffer zone has no basis in fact

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After many years of debate, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) is officially seeking comments on a proposed 10 mile buffer zone to protect the Chaco Culture National Park from oil and gas development. The comment period has recently been extended at the request of the Navajo Nation, which is pushing for a more reasonable 5 mile buffer. The reality is, the 10 mile limit has no basis in fact, but is merely based on emotion and innuendo.

Leading the charge against oil and gas drilling is the San Juan Citizens Alliance (SJCA), the Four Corner's own Greenpeace, who take emotion and innuendo to a new level. Here is a response to the concerns raised by the SJCA and others in opposition to development.

1. Protecting Cultural Resources – There is a perception that if a company has a lease from the BLM, they can drill wherever they want and do whatever they want, with no regard for any archeological sites that may exist. That is completely false. Prior to ANY surface disturbance, an oil company must commission an archeological survey to identify any such arch sites. Even a single pottery shard can cause the relocation of an entire well pad. In short, the risk of desecrating a significant arch site is practically nonexistent.

2. Protecting Sacred Lands - The SJCA site claims that over two dozen tribes (most located nowhere near Chaco Canyon) hold the region as sacred. As a result, they want to protect the area from the impact of modern human development, preserving it for “the old way!” However, the area already has modern homes with electricity and water wells, and the residents drive their cars to town and back, all of which takes energy. Thus, the “old

way” and the “modern way” already live in harmony in the area. So it turns out you can develop the land and enjoy the comforts of modern life and still protect the environment and cultural resources.

3. Protecting the Air - The SJCA claims that emissions from oil operations are toxic and cause cancer and respiratory problems. If SJCA’s implications were true, you would expect that with many thousands of wells, respiratory disease and cancer rates in San Juan County would exceed the national average. But according to the Cancer.Gov website, San Juan County is at 90% of the national average in cancer deaths per capita, and 65% of the national average in lung and bronchus deaths. Finally, Farmington was named by the World Health Organization as having some of the cleanest air in the country. The bottom line is that nobody living near a wellsite in the San Juan Basin (that would be most of us) is in danger from the emissions.

4. Protecting the Water - There is a never ending perception, fanned by the endless noise from the obstructionists, that fracking threatens water supplies. I wonder when the “Science is Real” movement will accept the science that debunks that myth. The Heartland Institute documented 21 independent studies that all determined that fracking does not directly impact ground water. This conclusion is substantiated by a 2015 report published by Obama’s EPA. The conclusion is in... the water is safe. Just ask Obama.

5. Protecting the Anasazi Structures - Concern has been voiced about vibrations from the frack jobs possibly damaging the cliff dwellings. Again, that is an emotionally driven opinion without any basis in fact. A frack job measures in at approximately -2 on the Richter scale (cannot be felt at the surface), while a large truck rumbling by can measure up to a +3. The Chaco Canyon ruins are in far more danger from the cars and trucks coming and going than from fracking, even if it were directly adjacent to the site. Prohibiting any drilling within 10 miles when a half mile or so would be

more than ample is another example of regulatory overreach done merely to appease the environmental community.

6. The Local Native Americans are Against Drilling - Most of the Indigenous support for a larger buffer zone come from tribes and or Native Americans who don't live anywhere near Chaco Canyon. Conversely, there are numerous Navajo Allottees who "own" land inside the buffer zone and whose rights to develop that land would be harmed by this unnecessarily large setback requirement. These locals are opposed to any buffer zone that would hinder their right to lease their lands for responsible development. In addition, thousands of Native Americans who work in the energy industry in the Four Corners will benefit from future activity. That is why the Navajo Nation, arguably the tribe most affected by development, is pushing for a smaller 5 mile buffer, because it is their own members who will benefit the most.

7. BLM is Corrupt - The SJCA website absolutely hammers on the BLM, implying that they are corrupt and are endangering Chaco "by violating their own rules in favor of Industry." What an inflammatory statement devoid of truth at any level. The BLM permit approval process is comprehensive, expensive, and can take from 6 months to a year for approval. Frankly, the regulatory burden is one of the reasons why there are only 4 rigs running in the San Juan Basin versus several hundred in the Permian where most of the land is private. It is not the BLM's role to prohibit oil and gas development. It is their role to develop the resources on behalf of all US citizens and to see that it is done right.

In summary, I agree with the desire to protect our cultural resources. However, the proposed 10 mile buffer zone is overkill that will render worthless hundreds of thousands of acres of mineral rights in the area. Hopefully the regulators will focus on the facts and will ultimately reduce the buffer to a more reasonable area.