



State of New Mexico

Office of the Governor

Bill Richardson
Governor

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Governor Bill Richardson's Effort to Protect Valle Vidal Waters Approved by EPA

(Santa Fe, NM) – Governor Bill Richardson recently received word that the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has approved his request to designate rivers and streams in Northern New Mexico's Valle Vidal as Outstanding National Resource Waters (ONRW) under the Federal Clean Water Act. The ONRW designation will mean increased water quality protections for the Valle Vidal in Taos and Colfax Counties. The designation also provides a legal standing that helps maintain the quality of the waters for the benefit of residents and wildlife, and will make attempts to drill for oil and gas in the area more difficult.

"I am very pleased that the EPA has recognized the unique, pristine nature of the Valle Vidal," said Governor Richardson. "The Valle Vidal's world class trout streams deserve this protection to help ensure that they are not polluted in the pursuit of energy development."

In early 2005, Governor Richardson charged the task of protecting the Valle Vidal and developing documentation for its designation as ONRW to the New Mexico Departments of Environment, Energy Minerals and Natural Resources and Game and Fish.

The agencies took the ONRW proposal for the Valle Vidal to the state Water Quality Control Commission in December 2005. This hearing included strong public support for the designation. The WQCC approved amendments to the New Mexico water quality standards rule that allowed for the designation and sent the proposal on to the EPA.

"Water is the lifeblood of the Valle Vidal's wildlife populations and serves an invaluable ecological function," said NMED Secretary Ron Curry. "We will use the designation as a tool to maintain the quality of the water and to protect the ecological integrity of the waters for future generations of New Mexicans."

This action supports other efforts made by the Richardson Administration to protect the Valle Vidal. Governor Richardson included the Valle Vidal in his Roadless Rule petition submitted to the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture in May. The Valle Vidal includes 101,285 acres of the 1.6 million acres of roadless land in New Mexico.

"New Mexico's Valle Vidal is precious and unique," said Cabinet Secretary for New Mexico's Energy, Minerals, and Natural Resources Department Joanna Prukop. "The EPA's approval validates the need to

preserve our highly sought after outdoor recreational areas that provide not only economic value, but ecological, cultural, social, recreational, and spiritual opportunities for our citizens.”

United States Magistrate Judge LaPorte of the Northern District of California recently reinstated federal protections on roadless National Forest areas across the country. This court decision appears to reinstate the roadless area protections put in place by the Clinton Administration and makes further action under the Bush rule unnecessary. However, Governor Richardson will continue to advocate for having the Valle Vidal added to the roadless inventory to make sure these protections are extended to this area.

The Valle Vidal, now at risk to oil and gas development, is home to the largest elk herd in New Mexico. It provides exceptional recreation opportunities and is prime habitat for elk and trout, which brings hunters, fisherman and tourists from all around the region to this place of rare beauty. The Valle Vidal was added to the National Forest System after the original roadless inventories were conducted and, to this day, lacks permanent protection.

The streams of the Valle Vidal flow into the Rio Grande and South Canadian drainages, which are home to New Mexico’s state fish, the Rio Grande cutthroat trout. The waters are also habitat for native trout populations and nourish the state’s largest elk herd.

The ONRW designation is the second for New Mexico. The WQCC designated the Rio Santa Barbara in the Pecos Wilderness near Penasco as an ONRW in 2005.