

Protecting New Mexico's Fort Stanton Cave

Against the objections of Republican legislators, the Congress of the United States took decisive action in late March to protect New Mexico's Fort Stanton Cave from future harm through mineral development or drilling.

Significantly, the legislation was originally introduced in Congress by the senior senator from New Mexico, Pete Domenici, a New Mexico native and conservative Republican who received a low lifetime environmental rating from the League of Conservation Voters. Senator Domenici, who held the longest tenure in the state's history with six terms, introduced the act on June 6, 2005 in the 109th Congress, where it passed by unanimous consent by the Senate, but was never considered by the Republican-controlled House of Representatives.

The act was introduced again by the Senator in the 110th Congress, on January 11, 2007. This time, the bill never came up for a vote by either the Senate or the Democratic-controlled House.

In October 2007, Senator Domenici decided to not seek re-election, owing to his declining health. His Democratic colleague, El Paso native Senator Jeff Bingaman, reintroduced his then-retired colleague's bill in January 2009, and it was added to the

Omnibus Public Lands Management Act of 2009. Featuring a variety of public land actions, this bill was passed by significant margins in both chambers of Congress, but ultimately defeated in mid-March, owing to a rule that required a two-thirds majority approval in the House. Unfortunately, Colorado Republicans Doug Lamborn from

be protected by the Bureau of Land Management as this nation's first underground Conservation Area.

With the legislation, the Bureau will now create a long-term management plan for the cave, providing for appropriate conservation management and appropriate use of the Conservation Area. The Bureau will also establish a cooperative agreement with Lincoln County, New Mexico, involving the local citizens in protecting the resources and in providing interpretation. In addition, cooperative agreements with the state and with organizations and institutions like the National Speleological Society and New Mexico Technical

University can be developed to continue meaningful scientific research within the cave.

In an irony like that of the anti-communist president Nixon's travel in the early 1970s to meet with the leaders of communist China, it took a Republican legislator with a shoddy environmental record to protect Fort Stanton Cave. Certainly, the senator's cave-protection actions do not excuse a lifetime of opposing environmental protections, but his love of and support of his native New Mexico helped guide his final victory as a legislator. For that, this significant western American cave will be the beneficiary.



Colorado Springs and Mike Coffman from Jefferson County both voted against the bill, providing the exact margin needed to defeat the measure.

Reintroduction of the Omnibus bill in late March finally provided the circumstances to see it approved by the Congress. On March 25, the House approved the bill by a large margin, again without the support of Representatives Lamborn and Coffman, but this time, a simple majority was needed to see the bill become law.

With the expected signature of the bill by President Barack Obama, Fort Stanton Cave and its impressive Snowy River corridor will