



Sacred, Cultural, and Historic Sites within 5–10 Miles of Chaco Culture National Historical Park

Paul F. Reed, Archaeology Southwest
June 2025

Interior Secretary Burgum is considering reduction options for the 10-mile protection zone around Chaco Culture National Historical Park; either revocation of the entire withdrawal or reduction to the 5-mile alternative proposed in the initial Environmental Assessment.

Either option would be catastrophic for the protection of the Park and the resources that lie within the 5–10-mile zone. In 2020, Archaeology Southwest completed a reconnaissance project of the 10-mile zone, identifying roughly 4,200 known archaeological, cultural, and historic sites in the 700,000-acre area encompassed by the zone.

Looking specifically at the 5–10-mile zone, our research reveals that 2,171 identified cultural sites are within this zone and at risk if a new 5-mile zone is promulgated (see Map 1). Sites in this zone speak to episodic and sometimes longer use of the area by diverse cultural groups, including Paleoindian, Archaic, Puebloan, Navajo, and others from about 10,000 BCE to the present. Rough percentages of sites include 35 percent Puebloan, 30 percent Navajo, 30 percent Archaic/lithic, and 5 percent other time periods. Based on Tribal ethnographic work and consultation across the Greater Chaco Landscape, sites dating to all periods are significant to modern-day Tribes across the Southwest. Because only 15–20 percent of the area has been archaeologically surveyed, the actual site count is undoubtedly much higher—perhaps as many as 12,000 cultural sites and traditional cultural places lie within the 5–10-mile zone.

A primary goal of Archaeology Southwest's 2020 project was to identify or confirm cultural communities in the 10-mile zone, with the main criterion being spatial proximity. In several cases, the mix of sites across time periods was substantial. For these areas, the geographically proximate sites were not described as discrete communities, but as site clusters.

Twelve significant ancient Chacoan-Pueblo communities lie within the 10-mile zone. These include the Bis san'ni Community, located a few miles northeast of Chetro Ketl, and the Pierre's Community, located up the Great North Road, at about the edge of the 10-mile protection zone. Additional Chacoan communities with the 10-mile zone include Casa del Rio, Bee Burrow, Escavada, Greasy Hill, Greenlee, Indian Creek, Mesa Tierra, Quartos Payasos, and Tse Lichii'. None of these communities will be protected if the 10-mile zone is reduced to 5 miles.

Four of the site clusters or communities that were studied in 2020 are within the 5–10-mile zone: Pierre's Community, North of Pierre's cluster, Split Lip Flat, and Chaco Northeast site cluster (see Map 1). The community at Pierre's has been studied extensively. The other three site cluster areas are not well known but they include significant Archaic, Navajo, and Puebloan sites. These clusters clearly illustrate the high density of sites located in the 5–10-mile zone adjacent to Chaco Culture National Historic Park.

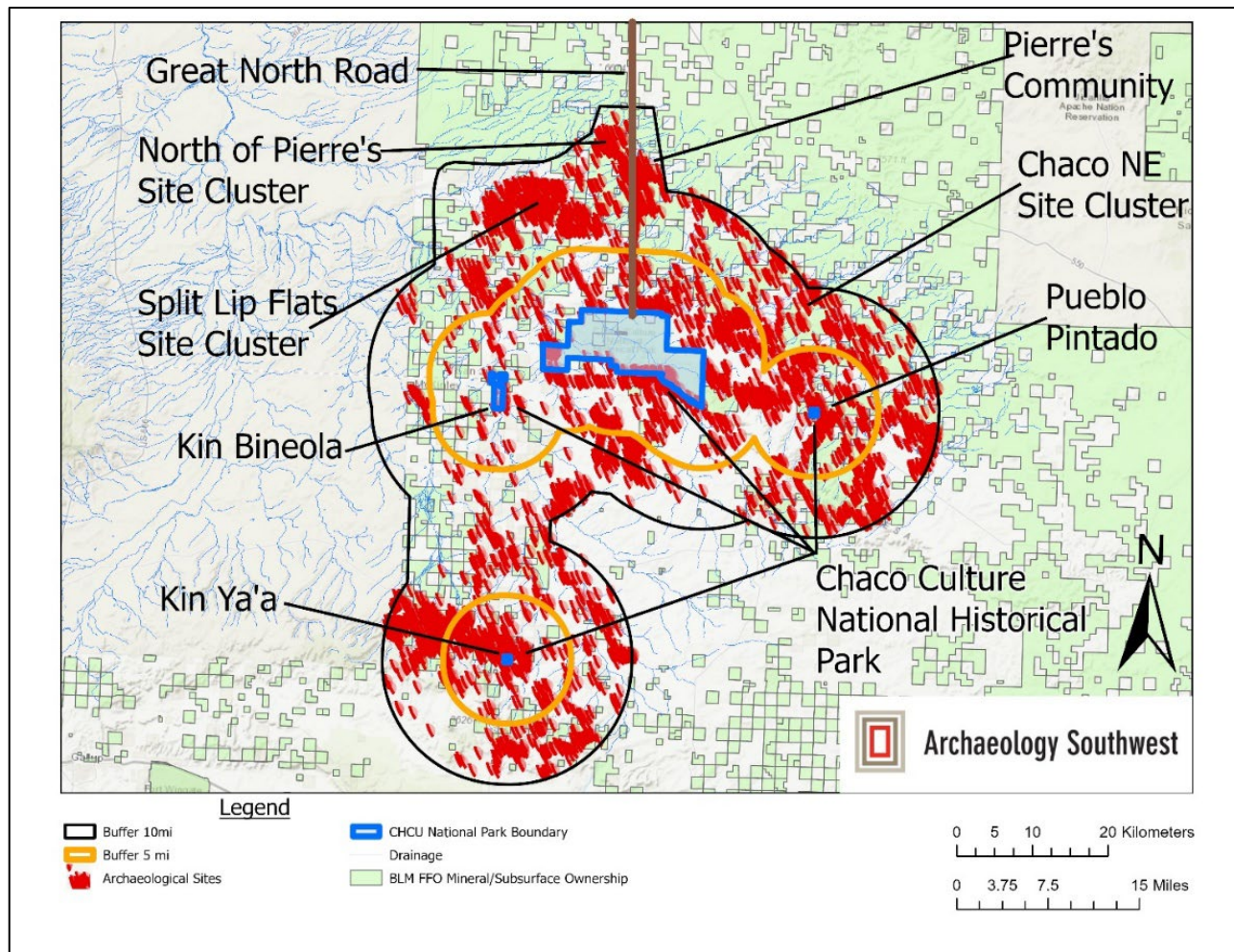
The BLM and BIA's primary avoidance of cultural resources under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act has spared many cultural resources from outright destruction. But sites have been damaged and destroyed, connections between sites and the landscape have been severed, and this has resulted in a fragmented cultural landscape across the Greater Chaco Landscape. A better perspective considers cultural sites not in isolation, but as pieces of larger communities on the landscape—a community or landscape-based approach. This can be implemented to protect communities and site clusters that have not yet seen impacts.

From the air, it is clear that around 10 miles from the Chaco Park boundary line, the Greater Chaco Landscape begins a serious transition. South of the 10-mile line, the landscape is relatively pristine. Certainly, there is limited development within this zone—limited oil-gas facilities and some powerlines and pipelines that cross the area. However, the 10-mile protection zone is largely unimpacted by oil-gas development. North of the 10-mile line, the landscape begins to change, and shows the effects of industrial development of the oil-gas resources that lie beneath the surface. This point is well illustrated by archaeologist Ruth Van Dyke's 2016 study in the Pierre's community. Van Dyke's study revealed more than a dozen oil-gas well pads, compressor stations, and other infrastructure, as well as pipelines, in the immediate area surrounding Pierre's community. Despite the creation of a BLM area of critical environmental concern (ACEC) in the early 1990s, numerous impacts

have occurred. Van Dyke's work clearly illustrates that the number and density of oil-gas well pads and other facilities have compromised the viewshed and soundscape around the Pierre's Community and permanently impact the ancient landscape.

These findings affirm our assertion that the 10-mile zone of protection is not arbitrary and has deep cultural significance. The 10-mile zone contains irreplaceable ancient and historic sites and communities that merit greater protection than BLM and BIA policy and regulations currently provide. Either revoking the 10-mile zone or cutting it to 5 miles will endanger thousands of cultural sites and should not be implemented.





Map 1. Greater Chaco Landscape showing site clusters, the 10-mile protection zone, and the 5-mile boundary line.