

Myths and Facts Concerning DOI’s Proposed Withdrawal of Federal Lands/Minerals Within Ten Miles of Chaco Culture National Historical Park

On January 6, 2022, the Interior Department (DOI) [proposed](#) to withdraw federal lands and minerals within roughly ten miles of Chaco Culture National Historical Park (NHP) to oil and gas leasing. DOI is conducting a public process for the proposal, which includes a series of public meetings and a public comment period. There is a great deal of interest in this process, as well as information circulating about the potential benefits and impacts of the withdrawal proposal. This document responds to certain narratives that are not entirely grounded in fact and appear to be creating confusion about what the withdrawal would and would not do.

	MYTH	FACT	SUPPORTING INFO
1.	Prohibiting leasing within ten miles of Chaco Culture NHP would dramatically alter the status quo.	False. Oil and gas leasing has not occurred on federal lands within the proposed withdrawal area for at least ten years, a timeframe that spans three presidential administrations.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • BLM has not issued a new oil and gas lease in the proposed withdrawal area since 2011. • In 2014, the Obama Administration announced publicly that it would “defer[] issuing any new leases . . . within a 10-mile radius around Chaco. . . .” • The Trump Administration also eventually agreed “to defer oil and gas leasing within a 10-mile radius of New Mexico’s Chaco Culture National Historical Park. . . .” • Since 2019, Congress has prohibited leasing on federal lands within the proposed withdrawal area. • In 2019, the New Mexico State Land Commissioner also forbade leasing on state lands within the proposed withdrawal area.



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2.	The proposed withdrawal will prevent Navajo allottees from pursuing oil and gas activity on their allotments.	False. The proposed withdrawal only applies to federal lands, and oil and gas development in the proposed withdrawal area has continued – without apparent disruption – in recent years.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● According to the official public notice, the proposed withdrawal would only apply to “public lands and interests in lands. . . .” ● Further, the withdrawal “would not affect existing rights of allottees or lease holders.” ● Since 2011 – when BLM last issued a lease within the proposed withdrawal area – it has approved at least nineteen drilling permits for existing leases within the withdrawal area. ● Over the same period, oil and gas companies drilled at least thirty-three new wells in the proposed withdrawal area, including at least four that access Navajo-owned oil and gas resources. ● Finally, on January 13, DOI held a lease sale for forty parcels on Navajo allotment lands, including multiple parcels within the proposed withdrawal area.
3.	Leaders and communities of the Navajo Nation uniformly oppose the proposed withdrawal.	False. The proposed withdrawal enjoys support from nearby communities and leaders within the Navajo Nation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● At least four Eastern Navajo Chapters – Counselor, Iyanbito, Ojo Encino, and Torreon/Star Lake – support the proposed withdrawal. ● Several community leaders have also spoken out in support of the proposed withdrawal.
4.	Oil and gas companies have not harmed cultural resources or sacred sites in the landscape surrounding Chaco Canyon.	False. Oil and gas companies have transformed some of the most culturally-sensitive areas around Chaco Canyon into “industrial parks.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Over the past few decades, BLM has leased over 90 percent of federal lands/minerals surrounding Chaco Culture NHP for oil and gas development. ● Meanwhile, oil and gas companies have drilled over 37,000 wells in the area and helped build a sprawling network of roads (15,000 miles) that’s five times greater than the distance from Los Angeles to New York. ● This has caused profound harm to cultural values in the landscape surrounding Chaco Culture NHP, as oil and gas wells, roads, pipelines, and other infrastructure have “destroyed” long stretches of the Great

			North Road and transformed Pierre’s Site – part of the Chaco Culture World Heritage Site – and other significant places into “ industrial parks .”
5.	A five-mile withdrawal will adequately protect Chaco Culture National Historical Park and the surrounding landscape from oil and gas development.	False. If the withdrawal boundaries are reduced to five miles, there would be significant impacts on Chaco Culture NHP, along with cultural resources and sacred sites in the surrounding landscape, many of which are affiliated with the Navajo Nation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • According to a recent survey, there are “more than 4,000 archaeological and historic sites in the northern portion of the protective zone,” many of which are affiliated with the Navajo Nation. • Reducing the withdrawal boundary to five miles could turn these places into “industrial parks,” which has already occurred at many culturally-significant locations outside of the proposed withdrawal area. • According to the National Park Service, leasing within the proposed withdrawal area “has the potential [to cause] significant adverse effects on park viewshed and related values. The [Chaco Culture NHP] viewshed contains numerous ancient road alignments, including portions of the Great North Road, and others that extend to the northeast and northwest. Should [leasing] go forward, park visitors will see construction and use of new oil and gas roads, interfering with their views of the ancient roads. Visitors will see oil and gas wells, new electric transmission lines, and heavy transport, construction, and ongoing well production traffic, all of which would cumulatively affect the context, setting and historical integrity of the park.”
6.	The administration must compromise and shrink the proposed withdrawal area because ten miles is the outer limit of what has been proposed to protect the area from oil and gas development.	False. Development restrictions well-beyond the ten-mile withdrawal area have been proposed in order to protect communities and cultural and natural resources from development.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In light of historic and ongoing impacts on communities, groups have called for development restrictions throughout northwestern New Mexico. • Tribal and state elected officials have also specifically proposed a thirty-mile protection zone around Chaco Culture NHP. • Even the Trump Administration entertained a broader protection zone – of fifteen miles – around Chaco Culture NHP.

7.	The proposed withdrawal will increase gas prices and endanger our energy security.	False. The proposed withdrawal will have no impact on gas prices or our energy security.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • While American households are feeling the pain of Putin’s price hike, oil executives are hoarding unused drilling permits and leases, and posting record profits. • There is no evidence that more leasing or increased production on public lands would lower gas prices or heating bills. • Further, oil companies are refusing to develop energy on nearly 14 million acres of public lands leases across the West, and are not using over 9,000 drilling permits on public lands, including over 4,500 in New Mexico. • Instead of developing energy with their idle leases and permits, oil executives are instead “return[ing] cash to the shareholders in the form of dividends or buybacks. . . .” • Finally, according to BLM, just 11 percent of federal lands/minerals in the proposed withdrawal area has “high” potential for future drilling.
8.	Outside conservation groups drove the administration to propose the withdrawal, not Tribal communities.	False. For years, Tribal leaders and communities have asked the federal government to protect the landscape surrounding Chaco Culture NHP from oil and gas development.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In 2009, the Hopi Tribe began raising concerns for proposed leasing near Chaco Culture NHP. • In 2014, the All Pueblo Council of Governors (APCG) passed the first of four resolutions that also raise concerns for oil and gas development near Chaco. • In 2016, APCG specifically called on the federal government to “make permanent the current, temporary 10-mile cultural protection or buffer zone that is in place surrounding Chaco Culture [NHP].” • APCG has backed the Chaco Cultural Heritage Protection Act of 2019, which would also withdraw federal lands within ten miles of Chaco Culture NHP from leasing, as well as DOI’s proposed withdrawal.

9.	This is a federal land grab that will take land from Navajo allottees.	False. The proposed withdrawal concerns and applies only to federal land; the Secretary of the Interior has no authority to extend the withdrawal to non-federal lands.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A federal mineral withdrawal does nothing more than prevent certain activities from happening on federally-owned lands and minerals. • Even if the Secretary of the Interior wanted to extend the withdrawal to non-federal lands, she has no authority to do so under federal law: “[t]he term “withdrawal” means withholding an area of Federal land from settlement, sale, location, or entry, under some or all of the general land law. . . .” • For these reasons, if the withdrawal is finalized, allottee land within the boundaries of the proposed withdrawal would remain under allottee ownership. • Notably, in 2019, when the State of New Mexico withdrew state lands from leasing, there was no change in the ownership of allotment lands or ability of allottees to use those lands.
10.	Chaco Culture National Historical Park and important cultural resources in the surrounding landscape are already protected.	False. Oil and gas activity has industrialized many culturally sensitive places in the landscape surrounding Chaco Culture NHP and, if allowed to further encroach within the proposed withdrawal area, could cause “significant adverse effects” on the national park.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Chaco culture’s sphere of influence encompassed much – if not the entirety – of the Four Corners region. • Evidence of this is found at Wupatki National Monument in Arizona, Chimney Rock National Monument in Colorado, and the Bluff Great House in Utah. • Yet, these protected places are exceptions to the norm, as development – particularly on public lands in northwestern New Mexico – has destroyed many significant cultural features created by the Chacoans and turned others into “industrial parks.” • Further, while oil and gas development is not allowed within Chaco Culture NHP, much of the surrounding landscape, including public lands bordering the national park, are open to leasing and drilling. • According to NPS, there would likely be “significant adverse effects on park viewshed and related values” if federal lands in the proposed withdrawal area are leased and drilled.