

RICHARDSON SUPPORTS KEEPING OTERO CANYON OPEN FOR PUBLIC USE

March 2, 2004

Governor Bill Richardson has voiced support for keeping the trails of Otero Canyon open for public use. Richardson, in a letter addressed to Kirtland Air Force Base Commander Colonel Henry Andrews, stated that he was 'hopeful that you can find some way of moving the proposed eastern perimeter fence so that it would lie between the existing trails and the Base.' The Governor continued that 'it is clear that the residents of the Albuquerque area, as well as tourists, have used and enjoyed those trails for decades' and that "it is apparent that a sensible compromise is available on this issue". He concluded his letter by offering the assistance of his office to help keep this trail system open and accessible to the public.

Governor Richardson now joins Senator Jeff Bingaman, Congressman Tom Udall, Congresswoman Heather Wilson, the Albuquerque City Council, the Bernalillo County Commission, the City of Albuquerque Open Space Division and the Village of Tijeras as an opponent to Kirtland Air Force Base's proposed fencing of the Otero Canyon Trail System.

Otero Canyon is a popular hiking, biking, equestrian and bird watching area on the East side of the Sandia Mountains that is part of a 'military withdrawal' that has been leased by Kirtland Air Force Base, but not blocked from public use, for the past 50 years. The subsequent trail system that has been partially built by the US Forest Service for public use has been called on the 'jewels of New Mexico' and is a nationally known destination for recreationalists.

A public meeting was held on June 23, 2003 and attracted over 600 people opposed to Kirtland's proposed fence location. During this meeting, the Base announced that a decision would be made on this issue following the end of the public comment period, July 23, 2003. This decision has been delayed, however, since Colonel Andrews assumed his 24 month command of Kirtland Air Force Base. On November 10, 2003, Andrews closed an upper Otero trail that leads to the fire tower, one of the most popular destinations in this area. This partial closure by the Base Commander effectively shut the door on a widely supported alternative fence proposal submitted by a grassroots advocacy group, the Friends of Otero Canyon.

While Governor Richardson's suggestion of moving the perimeter fence does not formally endorse the Friends of Otero Canyon alternative proposal, it acknowledges that viable alternatives exist that would allow the Base to secure its Eastern border and yet still keep the current network of recreational trails open for public use. The Governor's acknowledgment of Otero Canyon as a tourist destination underscores the importance of this destination to the state economy. The offer of assistance from the Governor's office and his suggestion that it may be appropriate to bring in an independent party to assess Otero Canyon issues demonstrates Richardson's willingness to work with the Base and the people of New Mexico to insure that good decisions are made regarding this popular recreational area.