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VALLE VIDAL PROTECTION ACT BECOMES LAW **PRESIDENT SIGNS LANDMARK LEGISLATION**

Taos, NM – After an intense and hard-fought three-year battle, President Bush signed Representative Tom Udall's **Valle Vidal Protection Act of 2005** into law yesterday evening. The new law will permanently protect the Valle Vidal, one of New Mexico's greatest natural treasures, by withdrawing the area from mineral leasing.

"The Valle Vidal Protection Act is a great step towards New Mexico's clean energy future, said Representative Tom Udall, the bill's sponsor. "Responsible management of our energy resources means that some places, such as the Valle Vidal, are simply off limits to development."

Udall authored and introduced the Valle Vidal Protection Act in late 2005. He worked aggressively to secure the support of the New Mexico delegation and, ultimately, the entire 109th Congress. The bill passed both the Senate and the House unanimously.

"Santa Claus came early this year," said Taos County Commissioner Charlie Gonzales. "This is a huge victory for the citizens of New Mexico. New Mexicans are demanding a clean energy future, an oil and gas industry that acts responsibly and clean air, water and a healthy economy,"

The Valle Vidal (Spanish for "Valley of Life") is a lush mountain basin in the heart of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains in northern New Mexico. A majestic landscape of breathtaking vistas and abundant wildlife, it is often referred to as "New Mexico's Yellowstone." However, the Valle Vidal was also threatened by the prospect of highly-intrusive coalbed methane development from El Paso Corporation of Houston, Texas, which petitioned the Forest Service to open the area to drilling in June of 2002.

El Paso Corporation, initially receiving a lukewarm reception from the Forest Service, solicited help from the White House Task Force for Energy Project Streamlining in 2003. Soon thereafter, the Carson Nation Forest set in motion a decision-making process to decide whether to lease the area for oil and gas development – a process that most often leads to the actual sale of lease rights. Ranchers, sportsmen, and community activists consequently joined with local businesses and conservationists to protect the Valle Vidal from mineral exploitation.

"This victory was imperative to me," exclaimed Jared Chatterly, founder and executive director of the American Outdoor Academy, a nonprofit with headquarters in Cimarron, New Mexico. "With its nearly intact ecosystem and proximity to several metropolitan areas, the Valle Vidal serves as an ideal outdoor classroom where students on week-long expeditions can learn environmental stewardship and outdoor recreation skills. The Valle Vidal is also a place that is personally important to me. It is where I got engaged to my wife and our kids went on their first camping trip; it has a lot of sentimental value. Protecting this treasure will not only preserve a beautiful piece of our National Forest for outdoor enthusiasts, but it will also strengthen Cimarron's economy by generating tourist dollars from visitors to the area. It is good to see the democratic process work and our elected officials respond positively to the desires of their constituents."

"Once those drilling companies get in there, they push the people out. We couldn't have that," Gonzalez said. "The Valle Vidal is a vital part of our lifestyle and a vital part of the sustainable, protected public-lands economy we depend on."

By 2005, the Coalition for the Valle Vidal had grown to represent more than 400 organizations, including seventeen local governments and three chambers of commerce and the Coalition began working with Rep. Udall. The Coalition found a willing champion.

"Protecting unique areas is part of a responsible energy policy," Udall said.

"Today's action gives the Valle Vidal the protection it has long deserved," said Governor Bill Richardson. "I would like to thank Senator Bingaman and Congressman Udall for their tremendous leadership on this issue. This legislation is a victory for the Valle Vidal's world-class trout streams, its trophy elk herd and all the hunters, anglers and outdoors-people that enjoy this pristine area."

Udall hinted at what is to come. "I will continue to work towards the protection other unique western lands," he said.

"This is a beautiful victory," concluded Gonzales. "I'm proud of my community for standing up for what's right. The Valle Vidal is now protected."

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