



## Merced de Santa Barbara

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May 9, 2026

United States House of Representatives  
Committee on Natural Resources  
1324 Longworth House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

Subject: Support for H.R. 2785, New Mexico Land Grant-Mercedes Historical or Traditional Use Cooperation and Coordination Act

Rep. Bruce Westerman, Chairman, and Rep. Jared Huffman, Ranking Member  
House Committee on Natural Resources Rep. Tom Tiffany, Chairman, and Rep. Joe  
Neguse, Ranking Member, House Subcommittee on Federal Lands

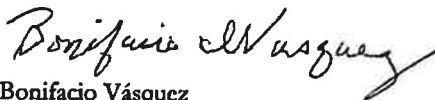
Dear Mr. Chairman and Mr. Ranking Member,

The Merced de Santa Bárbara is writing this letter in support of the passage of **H.R. 2785, New Mexico Land Grant-Mercedes Historical or Traditional Use Cooperation and Coordination Act** introduced by **Rep. Teresa Leger Fernández (NM-03)**. This important piece of legislation will ensure that our communities will retain access to the public lands that surround them, lands that were once the common lands belonging to our land grant. These common lands were unjustly taken by land speculators before the federal government purchased them and incorporated them into the national forest. The Santa Bárbara Land Grant was established by a grant of land from the Spanish Crown in 1796. In 1894 the U.S. Congress confirmed the Santa Bárbara Land Grant for 30,638.28 acres. Unfortunately however as a result of corruption driven by land speculation the land grant was not confirmed as belonging to the community in common, as originally granted by Spain, but rather as a "tenancy in common." This resulted in the privatizing of the common land and making our grant vulnerable to partition suits where any co-owner could initiate a suit to separate their private interest in common lands.

Our own attorney, Napoleon Bonaparte Laughlin, who became owner of an *undivided 1/3 interest* in the common lands grant in exchange for representing the land grant through the United States adjudication process, filed a partition suit in 1897, merely three years after confirmation. He was the high bidder when the common lands sold at public auction for \$6,000.00, netting him 25,338.28 acres and leaving the heirs a mere 5,300 acres that included only their private tracts. Laughlin nearly lost title of the Santa Bárbara Grant to tax seizures before A.B. McGaffey bought it in 1907 and formed the Santa Barbara Pole and Tie Company and for nearly twenty years, pulled some 400,000 ties from the Santa Bárbara Grant and surrounding area year after year. The massive environmental impact that this timber operation had on our common land provided only a small economic benefit to our ancestors. By 1925, the U.S. Forest Service set about acquiring the Santa Bárbara Land Grant from the Santa Barbara Pole and Tie Company through a timber exchange and by 1929, our grant was incorporated into the Carson National Forest. Consequently, the communities of the Santa Bárbara Land Grant lost access to the common lands that sustained us, and we became land locked by forested lands that were our birthright but that we could no longer access.

Today the communities of Llano Largo, Llano de la Yegua, Rodarte (originally Santa Bárbara) and Peñasco all still rely on these former common lands for sustaining their livelihoods. H.R. 2785 will ensure that the Carson National Forest remains responsive to the needs of our communities that rely on access to fuelwood to heat our homes and cook our meals and to medicinal herbs to sustain our health and our way of life. Not only will it help protect our access to these natural resources, but also to the communities primary water source, used for community drinking water system and irrigation. This measure would ensure that the Forest Service coordinates with us with regard to management of the federal lands surrounding our community that comprise our watershed. The Santa Bárbara Land Grant supports this legislation and asks that you do everything in your power to ensure its passage.

Sincerely,



Bonifacio Vásquez  
President  
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CC:

Representative Teresa Leger Fernández, New Mexico, 3rd District  
Representative Melanie Stansbury, New Mexico, 1st District  
Senator Ben R. Luján, New Mexico