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Merced Del Pueblo de San Joaquín Del Río de Chama
PO Box 262,
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May 8, 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

The Merced Del Pueblo de San Joaquín del Río de Chama offers this letter to support 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 of New Mexico. This legislation will ensure that our communities can access surrounding public lands that were once the common lands of our land grant-merced. Our communities rely on access to these forested lands to sustain ourselves. We heat our homes with fuelwood harvested from the Jemez Mountains. We harvest traditional items like medicinal herbs for remedios (remedies) we use to heal our ailments and piñón nuts that provide sustenance. The San Joaquín Grant lost these lands when the United States land adjudication process, following the Mexican American War in 1848, removed the common land, more than 99% of our land base, from local communal ownership and placed it under management of the U.S. General Land Office. Decades of social and economic hardship have plagued our communities because of the incomplete recognition of our property rights, dooming our people to poverty and dependency.

The San Joaquín del Río de Chama Land Grant was granted to our ancestors in August of 1806 by Spanish officials and by 1860, more than 800 residents lived in distinct communities within the exterior boundaries. The narrow strips of land lying within the river valleys were cultivated, our livestock were pastured in both lowlands and in the forest and natural resources were gathered from the surrounding communal lands. Our ancestors filed a petition seeking the

confirmation of the grant in 1861 and in 1872, the Surveyor General of New Mexico recommended to Congress confirmation of the 472,737-acre grant as a community grant, and though the House Committee on Private Land Claims and the General Land Office recommended confirmation, Congress failed to act. In September of 1894, the Court of Private Land Claims held that the grant was valid but limited to the individual farm tracts in the Cañón del Río de Chama. Land speculator Thomas D. Burns and the Rio Arriba Land and Cattle

Company claimed interest in the land grant and acted as plaintiffs, appealing the decision to the U.S. Supreme Court, which in 1897 upheld the Court of Private Land Claims decision that the unallotted lands within its exterior boundaries of the grant belonged to the government (see U.S. v. Rio Arriba Land and Cattle Company (1897), U.S. v. Sandoval (1897)). A resurvey of the grant reduced it to 1,422 acres along the Rio Chama and excluded all of the other outlying villages. To add further injury to the land grant community, the patent issued in 1905, was issued to the Rio Arriba Land and Cattle Company, not our ancestors, and the Company set about removing all of the families residing on 1,422 patented acres of the San Joaquín del Río de Chama Grant. The remaining balance of more than 470,000 acres became part of the public domain, the majority of which is now managed by the U.S. Forest Service, but that also includes lands managed by the BLM and the State of New Mexico.

H.R. 2785 will ensure that the Carson and Santa Fe National Forests and the Bureaus of Land Management Farmington District Office remains responsive to the needs of our communities. The creation of the Chama River Canyon Wilderness Area in 1978 included a historic cemetery which we only gained access to in 2013. Restricting our access to the cemetery is unfortunately only symptomatic of the difficulties that our communities have faced for decades when dealing with the U.S. Forest Service and the BLM when attempting to access our former common lands for traditional resources, including fuelwood, building materials like vigas (beams) and latillas (small poles used as lath between vigas) and medicinal herbs that are both medically and culturally important. We have made progress and recently signed an MOU with the Santa Fe National Forest to restore agriculture to the Cañón de Chama. This bill will help us access natural resources that our community relies on and will also ensure that the Forest Service consults with us regarding the management of the federal lands that surround us, which is important in building positive and collaborative relationships between federal agencies and land grants-mercedes like ours.

The Merced Del Pueblo de San Joaquín del Río de Chama gives our full support to this bill and we ask that you work to ensure that it is passed.

Respectfully,



Leonard T. Martínez, 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