

OPINION

ALBUQUERQUE JOURNAL | FRIDAY, MAY 21, 2021 | PAGE A12

EDITORIALS

NM's delegation should lead race to get La Luz run back

Nine runners took off from La Luz trailhead one morning in 1965, racing up the mountain in the first of what was to become one of the most celebrated trail runs in America and an integral part of the Albuquerque area's cultural tapestry.

The race takes runners from Forest Road 333 near Tramway up 4,600 feet over nine miles of paved roads and La Luz's lung-busting steep sections, switchbacks and rock slides before reaching the finish line near the parking lot at the top of the Sandias. Jemez Pueblo runners Steve Gachupin and Al Waquie are past champions. University of New Mexico graduate Rachael Cuellar was women's champ seven times.

In 2001, Trail Runner magazine declared La Luz one of the "12 most grueling trail races in North America," adding to its mystique. It became so popular, organizers switched to a lottery to pick a maximum 400 participants.

But the trail run may have seen its final race, thanks to some research into the "fine print" by the Forest Service.

District Ranger Crystal Powell told La Luz Trail Run organizers the Cibola National Forest would no longer allow the famed event because, "unfortunately, recent information

has come to light that affects my ability to continue authorizing (the run.)"

It's not that the run is harmful to the area landscape, plant or animal life. It's just caught in red tape.



JIM THOMPSON/JOURNAL

Friends and relatives cheer runners as they finish the 48th La Luz Trail Run on Aug. 4, 2013. Run organizers recently announced that Cibola National Forest will no longer permit the event.

Essentially, the Forest Service says research to update the forest plan revealed it should never have allowed the race — because it is a commercial event

— after the designation of the Sandia Mountain Wilderness in 1978. Organizers, understandably, are shocked and assumed they were grandfathered in. After all, the first La Luz run was 13 years before the wilderness designation and it continued annually until COVID-19 cancelled 2020's event.

Kurt Coonrod, president of the Albuquerque Road Runners Club, says the organization assumed over the years it had sort of a "handshake deal" to keep the race going after the Wilderness designation.

Powell says "the Forest Service recognizes the race predates the establishment of the Sandia Mountain Wilderness and is an important tradition in our community," but the Forest Service lacks the discretion to permit the run because it just came across certain restrictive language in the wilderness law and Forest Service regulations. Powell says the only way forward is to get Congress to change the law and create an exemption.

Coonrod says organizers have started working on that, reaching out to politicians and various wilderness advocacy groups to try to get them on board with the return of the run. A staffer for Sen. Martin Heinrich says the senator has "reached out to the U.S. Forest Service to see what options are available."

Heinrich, Sen. Ben Ray Lujan and the rest of our congressional delegation need to take this seriously. Finding a solution is squarely in their court.

"It's one of the classic trail runs, and one of the longest enduring events in the U.S., as far as trail running goes," Coonrod says. "It's on a lot of people's bucket list."

As such, it does not deserve a bureaucratic death sentence.

Losing it for good would be a shame, and New Mexico can hardly afford to get rid of "bucket list" events. Fixing problems like this — and cutting through bureaucratic obstacles — is why we send people to Washington to represent us. They should make it a priority to get this famous race back on track.