



## La Luz race hits end of trail as Forest Service denies permit

Ryan Boetel, *Albuquerque Journal*, N.M.  
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May 16—What is likely New Mexico's most famous trail running race may have been relegated to the history books.

Organizers of the La Luz Trail Run announced last week that the Cibola National Forest will no longer permit the famed event, which has been held on the first Sunday in August for more than half a century.

"I know this is unexpected and comes as a surprise," District Ranger Crystal Powell wrote to the La Luz race director. "Unfortunately, recent information has come to light that affects my ability to continue authorizing the (La Luz Trail Run) event."

Powell wrote the letter last year to the Albuquerque Road Runners Club, which organizes the event. The club recently posted Powell's letter denying it a permit and several other documents on its website.

The running club said the 2019 trail run may have been the last La Luz race. Although the pandemic led to the cancellation of numerous events in 2020, last year's La Luz race was canceled because the Forest Service wouldn't permit it.

Powell said in an email to the *Journal* that although the Cibola National Forest has historically given the run a special use permit, the race is a commercial event and therefore should never have been allowed to take place within a wilderness area. She said the Forest Service reached that conclusion as part of research the service was doing to update the Cibola National Forest management plan.

Congress designated the Sandia Mountain Wilderness in 1978, years after the start of the first race.

"The race was going on well before the Sandias became a wilderness area, and our understanding was that it was grandfathered in," said Kurt Coonrod, president of the Albuquerque Road Runners Club. "Our assumption (now) is that it was kind of a handshake deal."

Powell said the only way the race could return is if Congress passes a law that exempts the race from the rules that govern official wilderness areas.

"The Forest Service recognizes the race predates the establishment of the Sandia Mountain Wilderness and is an important tradition in our community," she said. "We have had a long-standing and positive relationship with the race organizers. However, our research determined we have no discretion to allow the proposed (La Luz race) under the Wilderness Act and Forest Service regulations."

Powell said the Sandia Mountain Wilderness boundary was cut around other commercial activities in the Sandias, such as the tramway, Ten 3 restaurant and ski area. Those activities are not in an official wilderness area and will not be affected.

### Effort begins

Coonrod said for the La Luz Trail Run to return, it could take years of lobbying lawmakers and wilderness advocates to try to get congressional approval for the race.

He said race organizers have already started on that work. They have reached out to politicians and various wilderness advocacy groups to try to get them on board with the return of the run.

Earlier this year, Albuquerque attorney Norm Gagne, who has finished the race several times, wrote to Sen. Martin Heinrich and then-Rep. Deb Haaland, both D-N.M., on behalf of race organizers asking for help restoring the race. Haaland, a marathon runner, is now interior secretary.

"Sen. Heinrich has received the letter from the Albuquerque Road Runners Club and understands the cultural value of the La Luz Trail Run and what it means for so many in New Mexico," Aaron Morales, a spokesman for Heinrich, said in an email. "The senator has reached out to the U.S. Forest Service to see what options are available for the future of the trail run."

### **'Rite of passage'**

In 1965, nine runners took off from the La Luz trailhead and raced up the mountain, marking the start of the Albuquerque tradition.

The race quickly gained popularity, both with regular Joes searching for a challenge and with the best runners in New Mexico and the region.

Jemez Pueblo runners Steve Gachupin and Al Waquie are past champions, and Waquie still holds the nine-mile course record of a little over 1 hour and 12 minutes, which he set in 1983, according to a Road Runners document detailing the history of the race. Rachael Cuellar, a New Mexico State University graduate, was a women's champion seven times. Del Norte High School graduate Simon Gutierrez has won the race 11 times.

Coonrod said that Frank Shorter, the last American to win an Olympic gold medal in the marathon, which he did in Munich in 1972, has also finished the race.

"It's one of the classic trail runs and one of the longer enduring events in the U.S., as far as trail running goes. It's on a lot of people's bucket list," he said. "It's been a rite of passage in New Mexico for high school runners and local, day-to-day runners."

### **Magazine ranking**

In 2001, *Trail Runner* magazine declared La Luz one of the "12 most grueling trail races in North America," which added to its mystique.

Since 2006, a surge in popularity forced organizers to use a lottery to select a maximum of 400 participants.

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.

The race typically draws a number of people from outside the state. In 2019, there were finishers from 14 states, including New Mexico, and a runner from Spain, according to UltraSignup. There were 15 finishers from Texas, 13 from Colorado and seven from Arizona.

Albuquerque runner Travis McWhorter, who has finished the La Luz Trail Run twice, said he'll miss the camaraderie at the top of the Sandias as runners cross the finish line.

"For the community at large in New Mexico and trail running in the Southwest, it has become a famous race with a lot of significance and history. So it's sad to see it go," he said. "It's just a warm and vibrant atmosphere among people ... cheering the runners on after they made a monumental effort up the mountain."