

Responsible Lighting and Protecting the Night Sky: Updating the NM Night Sky Protection Act

Think back to the year 1999. Cell phones were rare and the size of bricks. *The Spy Who Shagged Me* was a big movie. Everyone was worried about Y2K, remember? Yes, that was some time ago and things have changed.

In 1999, New Mexico passed the pioneering Night Sky Protection Act “to regulate outdoor night lighting fixtures to preserve and enhance the state's dark sky while promoting safety, conserving energy and preserving the environment for astronomy.”

Yet light pollution has dramatically increased across the state. In the big Rio Grande Valley cities, but also along the Interstate corridors, in small towns and especially in the southeast corner of the state where there are no towns but a lot of oil and gas drilling in the Permian Basin.

LED lights have become the norm, producing copious amounts of bluer light for the same or smaller power levels. On the plus side, there is now more appreciation of the importance of natural night skies.

Many of us are recognizing the values of responsible lighting and a natural night sky:

- Economic impact: tourism, residential communities, small businesses
- Worker safety: responsible lighting can be safer than excess lighting
- Security: responsible lighting can provide greater security
- National security: monitoring-tracking of satellites and near-Earth asteroids
- Human health: sleep better!
- Ecology: pollinators and migratory birds are adversely affected by poor lighting
- Energy/money savings : less wasted light, less wasted energy, more money!
- Respecting property rights: the right to protect against light trespass
- Human appreciation of our place in the Universe
- Cultural resource: multiple cultures have connections with the night sky
- Scientific study: 3 research universities have programs; major observatories
- Amateur astronomy: Lots of interest, multiple amateur societies, astrotourism
- New Mexico has a special natural resource!

What is meant by responsible lighting? Pretty simple. Put light only where you need it, when you need it, and only in the amount that is needed. Warmer-colored light is better for health, ecology and better blends with our cultural heritage. Responsible lighting reduces sky glow, glare and light trespass and preserves all the values just listed.

It's time to update the pioneering law to today's technical and environmental realities.

Proposed changes to the Night Sky Protection Act are being introduced during the 2025 legislative 60-day session. This basic update to the 1999 law would require full shielding below the horizontal for new lights to significantly reduce stray light plus remove exemptions for farms, ranches, dairies, feedlots, industrial, mining/oil and gas facilities after an adjustment period.

Importantly, no physical changes to existing lighting will be required.

We urge New Mexicans concerned about the adverse impacts of sky glow, glare and light trespass to contact their state senators and representatives to support the bill.

Derek Wallentinsen
State Council, New Mexico DarkSky
Chapter of DarkSky International