

New Mexicans Agree: State Needs Permanent Statewide Funding for Agricultural and Natural Resources Projects

During the 2020 legislative session, bipartisan legislation, Senate Bill 102 and House Bill 223, proposed to create a New Mexico Agricultural and Natural Resources Trust Fund (trust fund). As envisioned in 2020, the trust fund would establish a perpetual source of state funding dedicated to the restoration and protection of New Mexico's land, water, wildlife and agricultural resources using a portion of the state's budget surplus. Both bills generated significant discussion and interest, and although neither bills passed, the idea drew widespread support.

At the hearing for HB 223, the House Energy, Environment and Natural Resources Committee encouraged our coalition to continue its work on the trust fund concept. This report provides an update on our outreach efforts throughout 2020, as well as some of our key findings.

The trust fund legislation was modeled after successful programs in other states, notably Wyoming and Oregon. In Wyoming, the legislature created the Wyoming Wildlife and Natural Resource Trust (WWNRT) in 2005 to enhance and conserve wildlife habitat and natural resources throughout the state. The WWNRT is funded by interest earned on a permanent account, donations and legislative appropriations.

Since its inception the WWNRT Board has allocated nearly \$97 million to projects and leveraged a five to one match in dollars spent. This translates into more than \$580 million in work on the ground and more than 800 total projects completed in communities throughout the state.

The arrival of COVID-19 and its health and economic impacts on New Mexico communities reinforced the importance of our work while putting it in a new perspective. The pandemic highlighted that protecting and restoring New Mexico's agricultural lands and natural resources are vital to the health and well-being of our people. It became even more clear that the projects we envision being funded through a trust fund are essential to the long-term resiliency of the state and could also lay the foundation for economic recovery linked to job creation while fulfilling the goals of the state's climate strategy.

In short, as a response to the pandemic, the steering committee explored opportunities to link natural resource goals with economic recovery, looked more broadly at issues of food security and agriculture, and expanded our outreach efforts to encompass a broader community of stakeholders.

Stakeholder Outreach

During the 2020 legislative session, the steering committee was asked to include more people and organizations in our work and to expand participation in order to maximize input and feedback on future legislation. To accomplish this, we invited additional organizations to be part of the steering committee and developed a statewide stakeholder engagement plan with assistance from a professional facilitator.

During the interim the steering committee hosted a series of topic-based webinars and listening sessions focused on issues that emerged during the legislative session. Each event had between 65 and 85 participants representing conservation organizations, agriculture producers, private landowners and land managers, sportsmen and sportswomen, Acequia users, state agencies, tribal members and tribal governments.

We also hosted a statewide listening session on the trust fund and tasked the facilitator with conducting one on one interviews with organizations who took great interest in the trust fund or otherwise expressed strong opinions regarding the legislation. Throughout 2020, we provided routine updates to the governor's office, state agencies and the legislature.



Amongst stakeholders we found the following aspects of a trust fund were areas of shared agreement:

- Need for matching state funds to better leverage federal and private dollars to advance conservation objectives across New Mexico
- Importance of increased funding for habitat restoration projects
- Maintaining and improving agriculture viability across New Mexico
- Voluntary agreements to conserve open space for wildlife habitat and agriculture
- Establishing partnerships to advance natural resource stewardship
- Maintaining and improving wildlife habitat and wildlife corridors
- Effectively removing invasive species
- Restoring forest and watershed health
- Restoring the health and productivity of grasslands and rangelands
- Investing in projects to benefit New Mexico's Acequia communities
- Increased funding for natural resource projects on tribal lands
- Improving water quality and quantity through ecological means
- Restoring aquatic resources, including rivers, riparian areas, wetlands and cienegas
- Ensuring state investments are equitably distributed and address the needs of all of New Mexico's diverse communities
- Recognizing and moving equity in natural resources forward

Findings

During the course of the steering committee's outreach, we consistently heard from people throughout New Mexico about **the need for permanent, statewide funding for natural resource projects** in order to leverage money from federal programs, such as USDA farm bill conservation programs. The need for additional matching funds was a sentiment echoed across nearly every interest group, including land trusts seeking to protect open space, NGOs wanting to restore wildlife habitat, landowners investing in restoration and conservation projects on private lands, tribal natural resource departments seeking to protect aspects of their natural heritage, Acequia users hoping to protect and maintain their traditional ways of life, and producers trying to improve ecological health while feeding their local communities. Simply put, stakeholders engaged in conservation and restoration projects across the state, from Acequias to tribal communities to NGOs, could significantly advance their work with greater access to state funding.



Jobs and Economic Recovery

Another common theme that emerged during our outreach was the importance of state investments in ecological restoration as a means to **create jobs and drive economic recovery**. In states that make significant investments in restoring natural ecosystems, these investments lead to the emergence of a restoration economy, an economic sector focused on restoring forest and watershed health, improving degraded rivers and aquatic resources, and promoting the health of grasslands, rangeland and farmland, among other things. Development of a restoration workforce would be an important step in merging economic goals with climate resiliency goals outlined in the state's climate strategy.

New Mexico's Youth Conservation Corps members learn valuable skills, earn a living wage, and serve New Mexico during trail maintenance and resource protection projects like the one pictured here.

Photo by Sarah Wood.



Climate Change and Drought

Concerns about the impacts of climate change and drought on New Mexico's natural and working lands was a common theme that emerged. While most efforts to combat climate change have focused on increasing renewable sources of energy and limiting dependence on fossil fuels, there is a need to do more to improve the resilience of our natural systems to a changing climate. **We must embrace strategies that will enhance our land and waters to prevent, reduce and mitigate the impacts of a changing climate.** The trust fund can be a source of funding to address these concerns.

Elephant Butte reservoir during the 2002 drought.

Photo by USGS.



Protect Working Lands

Ensuring agricultural producers can advance conservation goals, as well as feed the state's growing population, provide economic security to rural communities, and **protect working lands and open space** were key themes that surfaced. This was also a primary topic of interest when engaging leaders from New Mexico's Acequia communities. These groups view a trust fund as an important resource for protecting water rights and agricultural land uses in their communities, and for keeping agricultural lands in production.

A New Mexico rancher with his eye on the herd.
Photo by the Western Landowners Alliance.



Equity and Inclusion

During our interim work, and in our conceptualization of what comes next for the trust fund legislation, the steering committee is committed to grounding our work in principles of equity and inclusion. What we heard from stakeholders and legislative leaders is that **equity and inclusion need to drive both our process and our outcomes**. Key themes that emerged for equity in the context of a trust fund are to: include diverse voices and perspectives in its conception; recognize a history of exclusion of underrepresented communities in decisions about natural resources; and ensure the program is administered equitably to benefit all New Mexicans, especially those who don't always have a voice in decision-making. Many suggested that investments made by the trust fund should be used to benefit historically underserved and underrepresented communities as well as engage and empower youth in agriculture and natural resource jobs.

A crew removes sheep fence to replace with wildlife friendly fence.
Photo by Sarah Wood.



Water Resources

Concerns about the future of New Mexico's water resources were common sentiments expressed during stakeholder outreach. Conservation NGOs, agricultural interests, acequia users, and wildlife advocates all share a common interest in seeing more done to **protect, conserve and restore water resources**. For some, it's a matter of water availability, and for others it's an interest in protecting ecological flows and aquatic habitats to benefit fish and wildlife. Many stakeholders view the trust fund as an important funding source for restoring degraded rivers, wetlands and watersheds.

Water is life in New Mexico.
Photo from Adobe Stock.



Land Protection

All the stakeholders we engaged expressed an interest in land protection, although there are differences in interpretation. There is widespread support for the idea of using voluntary conservation easements as a tool to **protect agricultural lands, wildlife habitat, and open space**. There is also a great deal of interest in using a trust fund to protect lands through fee title acquisitions. For some stakeholders, fee title acquisitions are a necessary tool for conserving vital wildlife habitat and open space. Others expressed concerns about taking lands out of agricultural production, the loss of tax revenue when lands move into the public domain and the long-term costs associated with new, state owned lands. In short, land protection is recognized as an important objective, and there are differing ideas on how to best achieve it in the context of the trust fund.

Kasha-Katuwe Tent Rocks National Monument
Photo from Adobe Stock.



Wildlife Habitat

In addition to creating jobs, diversifying the state's economy, stabilizing food production, and protecting land and water for human communities, a trust fund could significantly benefit the state's vulnerable wildlife populations and wildlife habitat. **New sources of funding are essential** to meeting objectives outlined in New Mexico's State Wildlife Action Plan and Wildlife Corridors Action Plan. A trust fund would complement existing efforts to conserve wildlife habitat, improve connectivity and preserve the state's unique biodiversity.

The pronghorn is an iconic migratory animal of New Mexico.

Photo by John Hollingsworth/USFWS

Looking Ahead

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing economic crisis the steering committee decided against pursuing legislation this session.

Throughout the coming year, the steering committee will continue to engage interested stakeholders, and will work with leaders from around the state to determine how a New Mexico Agricultural and Natural Resources Trust Fund best contributes to meeting already established goals and objectives for the state, including objectives outlined in New Mexico's Climate Strategy, Forest Action Plan, and Wildlife Action Plan, among others.

2020 Listening session summaries

Update and next steps following 2020 legislative session and in response to COVID-19

We received early input from stakeholders to help further develop trust fund legislation and set priorities and goals for future sessions, especially in light of the pandemic.

Restoration Projects in New Mexico: Successful Projects and Funding Needs

Speakers: Debbie Hughes, New Mexico Association of Conservation Districts; Toner Mitchell, Trout Unlimited

- Overview of restoration projects being implemented in New Mexico with existing funding
- Discussion of projects that could be completed if a permanent statewide funding source existed that would leverage more federal dollars.

Funding Wildlife Habitat and Restoration Projects: Lessons from Wyoming and Oregon's Programs; Opportunities for New Mexico

Speakers: Bob Budd, Executive Director, Wyoming Wildlife and Natural Resources Trust Fund; Eric Hartstein, Senior Policy Coordinator, Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board; Michael Dax, Southwest Representative for New Mexico, Defenders of Wildlife

- Discussion of successful conservation and restoration programs in Wyoming and Oregon, including examples of projects funded.
- An overview of existing conservation programs in New Mexico and examples of how a New Mexico Agricultural and Natural Resources Trust Fund could be structured.

Equity in Natural Resources: Learning from New Mexico's Past to Inform Our Future

Speakers: Ángel Peña, Nuestra Tierra Conservation Project; Lawrence Gallegos, Western Landowners Alliance

- How a legacy of exclusion, oppression, and injustice has shaped how natural resources are managed and created barriers to participation in decision-making.
- We took steps forward to build and expand initiatives to promote equitable access to the outdoors, enhance and expand opportunities for public participation during each step of the decision-making process for our lands, waters, wildlife and people of New Mexico.

Conservation Easements and Land Acquisitions; Existing Programs, Potential Opportunities

Speakers: Brittany Fallon, New Mexico Wild; Bill Midcap, Rocky Mountain Farmers Union

- Overview of different types of conservation easement and land acquisition programs currently available in New Mexico
- Update on potential new opportunities resulting from the passage of the Great American Outdoors Act

April 29

June 16

July 24

Aug. 4

Sept. 9

Tribal Lands and Tribal Communities; Successful Projects and Ongoing Needs

Speakers: Garrett Altmann and Phil Silva, Forestry Department, Santa Clara Pueblo; Adam Ringia, Executive Director, Southwest Tribal Fisheries Commission; Delane Atcitty, Executive Director, Indian Nations Conservation Alliance; Thomas Mendez, Division of Resource Management & Protection, Mescalero Apache Tribe

- Examples of past and current tribal natural resource projects
- How a dedicated source of statewide funding for conservation and restoration projects would benefit New Mexico's tribal communities

Acequias and Agriculture

Speakers: Paula Garcia, Executive Director, New Mexico Acequia Association; Ralph Vigil, Farmer & Owner, Molino de la Isla Organics LLC and Chair, New Mexico Acequia Commission; Norman Vigil, Farmer and New Mexico Association of Conservation Districts, Acequia Program Manager

- Importance of water resources and infrastructure
- Natural resource concerns for acequia communities and users

Diverse Participation

Each listening session was unique, provided participants with opportunities to learn and connect with people throughout New Mexico, and served as a venue to bring diverse interests together to discuss a New Mexico Agricultural and Natural Resources Trust Fund. Each listening session had between 65 and 85 registrants, including representatives of the following organizations, agencies and tribal entities, as well as private citizens, inter alia:

Organizations

- Agri-Cultura Cooperative Network
- Alianza Agri-Cultura de Taos
- American Farmland Trust
- Amigos Bravos
- Archdiocese of Santa Fe
- Audubon Southwest
- Badger Creek Ranch
- Board Works by Ledgerwood, Ray Ledgerwood
- Catena Foundation
- CHHMM, Center of Excellence
- Colorado River Sustainability Campaign
- Conservation Voters of New Mexico
- Defenders of Wildlife
- Del Medio Forestry/ Cerro Negro Forest Council
- Doña Ana Soil and Water Conservation District
- Farm Credit of New Mexico
- Farm to Table New Mexico
- First Nations Development Institute
- Forest Guild
- Holistic Management International
- Institute for Applied Ecology
- Lone Tree Mesa
- Mid-Region Council of Governors
- Mule Deer Foundation
- National Audubon Society
- National Parks Conservation Association
- National Wildlife Federation
- National Young Farmers Coalition
- New Mexico Acequia Association
- New Mexico Acequia Commission
- New Mexico Association of Conservation Districts
- New Mexico Coalition to Enhance Working Lands
- New Mexico Farmers' Marketing Association
- New Mexico First
- New Mexico Healthy Soil Working Group
- New Mexico Land Conservancy
- New Mexico Wild
- New Mexico Wildlife Federation
- Northwest New Mexico Council of Governors
- Nuestra Tierra
- Questa Del Rio News
- Quivira Coalition
- Rio Grande Agricultural Land Trust
- Rio Grande Chapter, Sierra Club
- River Source
- Rocky Mountain Farmers Union
- Santa Fe Conservation Trust
- Sierra Club
- Siete del Norte
- Taos Land Trust
- Teddy Roosevelt Conservation Partnership
- The Nature Conservancy
- The Trust for Public Land
- Thornburg Foundation
- Trout Unlimited
- Unique Places Real Estate
- Ute Creek Cattle Company
- Valencia Soil and Water Conservation District
- Vermejo Ranch
- Western Conservation Foundation
- Western Landowners Alliance
- Western Resources Advocates
- Wild Earth Guardians
- New Mexico Healthy Soils Working Group
- New Mexico State Land Office
- New Mexico State University
- Office of the Natural Resource Trustee
- The Office of Senator Martin Heinrich
- United States Department of Agriculture

Oct. 28

Dec. 1

Tribal Nations and Associations

- Indian Nations Conservation Alliance
- Laguna Pueblo
- Mescalero Apache Tribe
- Pueblo of Acoma
- Pueblo of Santo Domingo
- Pueblo of the Tesuque
- San Felipe Pueblo
- Santa Clara Pueblo
- Southwest Tribal Fisheries Commission
- Taos Pueblo

Agencies

- New Mexico Department of Agriculture
- New Mexico Department of Game and Fish
- New Mexico Division of Forestry
- New Mexico Energy, Minerals and Natural Resources Department