

# New Mexico

Year In Review 2024

The Nature Conservancy in New Mexico

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# Dear Friends,

Over the past 50 years, you've helped us build a tremendous legacy of conservation in New Mexico. As I reflect on our inspiring progress, I'm also mindful of the unprecedented challenges we now face. Each day I speak to different New Mexicans from all walks of life who are touched by TNC's work. Without exception, they feel the growing urgency of our mission. And, without exception, they are excited when I highlight for them what I see as TNC's "superpowers" for conservation success in this state: (1) the incredible ecological and geographic distribution of our projects; (2) the cultural and institutional diversity of our partners; and (3) the extraordinary variety and scope of our conservation strategies.

As you'll see in this Year in Review, these key attributes stand out in our most groundbreaking projects, from our work in northwest New Mexico with the Jicarilla Apache Nation and the State of New Mexico on the San Juan River, to our partnership with the community of Raton and our acquisition of the Buck Ridge Ranch. I also see TNC's strengths fueling our collaborations with multiple Indigenous Nations on bison reintroduction, our massive restoration efforts in the upper Rio Grande watershed, and our ongoing protection and restoration efforts on the Gila and Mimbres Rivers of southwestern New Mexico.

But behind each one of these remarkable success stories lies TNC's greatest superpower of all: **you**. It's truly the enduring commitment of members like you that enables TNC to pursue—and deliver—on a better and brighter future for New Mexico. Thank you for your encouragement, your passion and your support!



Terry

ON THE COVER Paintbrush wildflower at Bartlett Mesa Ranch © Katie Millard/TNC THIS PAGE Terry Sullivan © Jenna Schoenfeld



## WHERE WE WORK

### SAN JUAN RIVER

In 2023, TNC signed a first-of-its-kind partnership with the Jicarilla Apache Nation and the New Mexico Interstate Stream Commission to lease 20,000 acre-feet of water per year for the next 10 years from the Nation to benefit both nature and people. © Roberto Rosales

### RIO GRANDE WATER FUND REFORESTATION

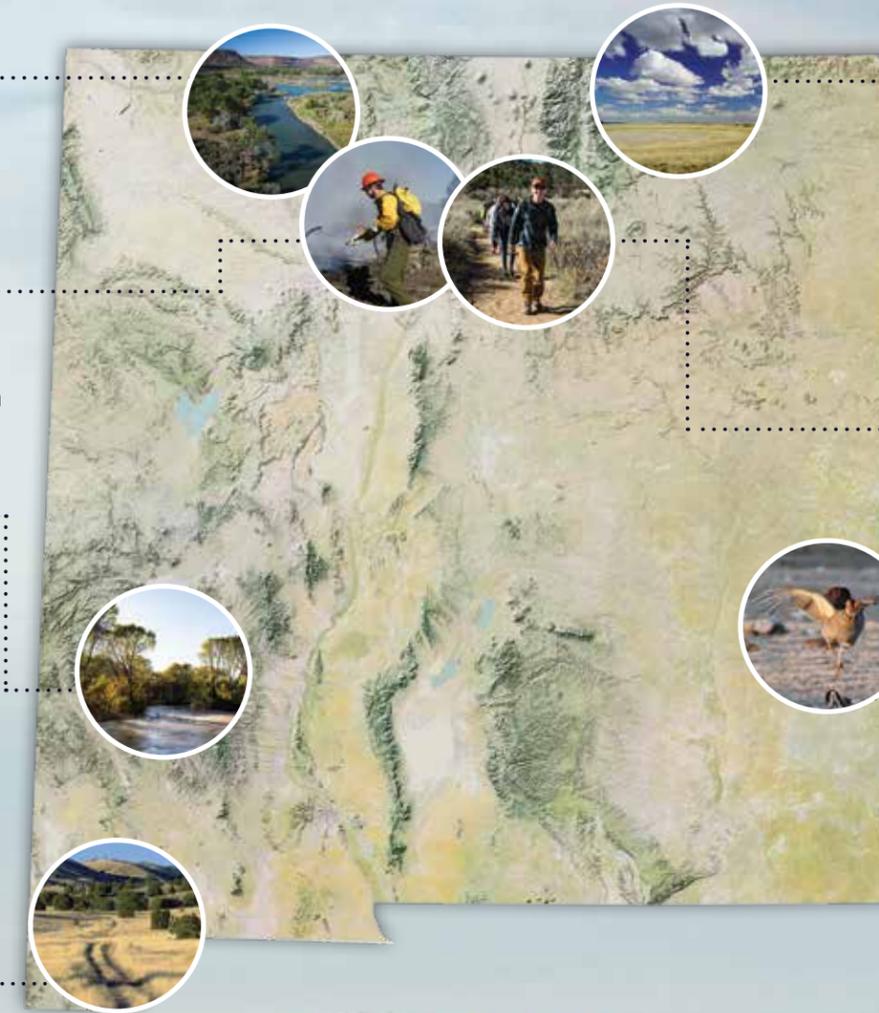
More nurseries, seed storage and growing capacity will help us ramp up reforestation work, which also creates more jobs. © Eytan Krasilovsky

### GILA & MIMBRES RIVERS

Free-flowing rivers in the southwest and their forested corridors provide habitat for fish, birds and endangered wildlife, such as the Chihuahua chub and Chiricahua leopard frog. © Fauna Creative

### DIAMOND A RANCH

One of the most significant natural sites in the nation, the landscape hosts more than 700 species of plants, 75 mammals, 50 reptiles and amphibians and 170+ types of breeding birds. © Terry Sullivan/TNC



### BARTLETT MESA RANCH AND BUCK RIDGE RANCH

The Southern High Plains Initiative aims to protect a network of lands and waters across Colorado, Kansas, Oklahoma, New Mexico and Texas that will boost climate resilience, preserve biodiversity and support sustainable agricultural communities. © Brad Cory/TNC

### SANTA FE CANYON PRESERVE

Years of restoration and conservation work have turned what was once the center of the city's hydroelectric industry into an oasis with wildflowers, willows and more than 200 bird species. © Roberto Rosales

### MILNESAND PRAIRIE PRESERVE

Long recognized as the center of the state's prairie chicken population, the 28,000-acre Milnesand Prairie Preserve has more than 50 leks, or display grounds—an extraordinary density of birds. © Jacquelyn Hall/TNC



A herd of pronghorn antelope © Blake Gordon



## Protecting the Hi Lo Country: Adding Another Piece to the Conservation Puzzle



**If you are lucky enough to experience a sunrise in the grasslands, you will witness nature’s magic.**

Around you, the air pulses with the primordial sounds of bird song, chirping crickets and rustling grasses. Above you, the infinite prairie horizon glows with the delicate pink of first light. Dawn in this special place is about much more than beauty, though. Each day marks the

endurance of a unique habitat crucial to both nature and people—and one that grows more vulnerable by the minute.

Grasslands are the least protected and most imperiled habitat on our planet. Their loss, due to threats like conversion to agricultural cropland and invasive species, comes at a time when the world faces unprecedented wildlife decline and extinctions driven by climate change. That’s why TNC is working across the Southern High Plains in New Mexico, Colorado, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas to safeguard 30 million acres of the healthiest and most intact grasslands habitat left in the United States. Healthy, connected grasslands not only sustain an incredible array of wildlife, but they also support rural traditional communities; secure critical water supplies for people, nature, and agriculture; and store carbon.

TNC’s protection of the Buck Ridge Ranch, located outside Raton, is the Conservancy’s latest acquisition and makes an important contribution to the conservation patchwork. The 1,430-acre ranch straddles the boundary between grasslands and foothills forest, providing critical habitat for numerous species of birds and mammals. The landscape is home to the endangered New Mexico meadow jumping mouse and a seasonal home for a locally significant herd of elk that occupies the Colorado–New Mexico border.

Buck Ridge Ranch is connected to the chapter’s 2022 acquisition of the adjacent Bartlett Mesa Ranch and provides a pathway to creating a connected network of future public lands from Raton to the Colorado border and beyond.

“Our vision is to eventually connect these properties to Sugarite Canyon State Park and one day to Colorado’s Fishers Peak State Park,” explains Terry Sullivan, New Mexico state director for The Nature Conservancy. “Piece by piece, TNC is helping to build a network of grasslands that will boost climate resilience, preserve biodiversity and support sustainable agriculture.”

The City of Raton initiated the collaborative effort a few years ago, seeking to attract visitors and enhance quality of life for its residents.

“Outdoor recreation is a priority for Raton’s economic sustainability efforts, and we are pleased to work with our partners,” adds Scott Berry, former city manager, Raton. “I’m excited the public will have the chance to experience the unique outdoor recreation opportunities of the northeast New Mexico high mesa country.”

**“Piece by piece, TNC is helping to build a network of grasslands that will boost climate resilience, preserve biodiversity and support sustainable agriculture.”**

~ Terry Sullivan, State Director





# Celebrating Increased Funding to Protect Forests and Water

**When you turn on the tap in Albuquerque or Santa Fe, the water that pours out is at the end of a hundred-mile journey.**

Protecting the sources of that water and the rivers that carry it through which it flows is the central focus of The Nature Conservancy's Rio Grande Water Fund (RGWF), a collaborative effort to improve forest health to reduce severe fire risk and protect your water. This year, TNC received a \$9.8 million grant from the U.S. Forest Service to increase the pace and scale of this important work.

Most of the tap water in New Mexico originates in the headwaters of the San Juan River, just across the border in Colorado near Pagosa Springs. Water comes from three tributaries, the Blanco, Navajo, and Little Navajo Rivers. It is diverted through the 13-mile Azotea Tunnel under the continental divide to Heron Reservoir. There it is stored for later use by the cities of Albuquerque and Santa Fe, irrigators in the Middle Rio Grande Valley, and 10 other New Mexico communities.

Fire is part of the natural cycle in the forests where our water originates and flows. Fires ignited by lightning and Indigenous stewards historically burned with regularity, burning at low intensities across the

forest floor, consuming fallen needles and grass while thinning trees. Over the last four centuries, grazing, logging, and fire suppression have allowed fuels to accumulate and dense tree stands to proliferate. Now, whenever a wildfire burns, it is likely to burn with great intensity, burning through the tree canopy and leaving behind large areas denuded of vegetation. Climate change increases this risk.

Burned areas produce flooding, erosion, and debris flows that threaten any buildings or infrastructure in the downstream floodplain. The water diversions and tunnels used to move our critical water supplies from the San Juan Basin are vulnerable to these post-fire hazards. Around 15,000 acres of forest need to be restored to significantly reduce the risk of wildfire to these watersheds and our water supply.

"We are proud to have partnered over the last decade with land and water managers to mitigate this risk to our water supplies by thinning overgrown forest stands and reintroducing low-intensity fire to more than 2,000 acres of forest in critical watersheds," says Steve Bassett, conservation director for TNC in New Mexico. "We are incredibly thankful for this new funding, which will help us complete an additional 2,500 acres of forest restoration work and get us to about 30% of our goal."





# Conserving Our Water Resources

## Testing Water-Saving Crops on the Gila River

Irrigation of forage crops, primarily alfalfa and grass hay and pasture, consumes most of the water used in the Upper Colorado River Basin. At the same time, drought and rising temperatures are negatively impacting water supplies in the region and putting increased pressure on agricultural water users to adapt and innovate.

One exciting opportunity involves testing the viability of alternative, more drought-resilient forage crops. The Nature Conservancy is participating in a research project that is studying whether Kernza®, a perennial substitute for wheat, would use less water, while also providing nutrition for cattle, improving soil health, and capturing carbon.

On the Gila River at TNC's Gila River Farm, Wendel Hann, a rancher and owner of Gila River Ranch, planted Kernza® for the first time last year and has already seen positive results.

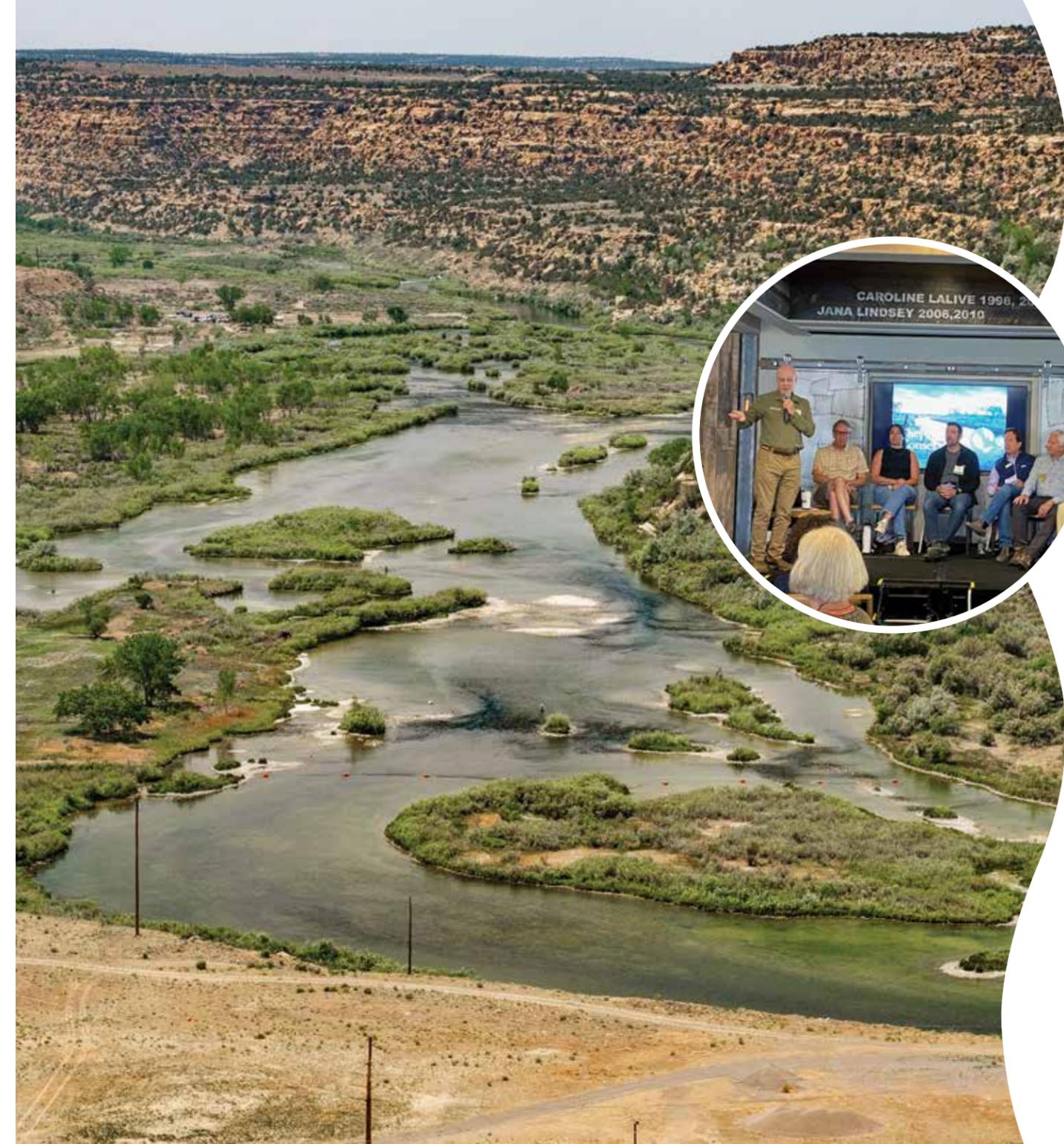
"In the hayfield where I planted Kernza® last fall, the organic material in the soil has increased and more carbon is being stored than previously," says Hann. "The large seed heads are definitely good grain food for birds and other small mammals. I baled

the Kernza® and am feeding it to my animals, and their hooves are helping stomp the seed into the ground. I'm excited to plant more acres next year since it's been so productive and survived water stress so well."

## Educating Tribal Youth about Water and Conservation

Getting out into nature and learning about the world around us is one of the best ways to grow and deepen appreciation for the lands and waters we all depend on. Last summer, as part of their historic water sharing agreement with the Jicarilla Apache Nation, staff from The Nature Conservancy and NM Interstate Stream Commission assisted Jicarilla Apache Game & Fish with their Wild C.O.R.E (Community Outreach & Education) event, a summer educational program for school children and youth. Participants learned about water resources, conservation, wildlife and fish and enjoyed spending time next to the Navajo River and a nearby lake.

"Testing water quality with the kids and families was such a fun way to talk about concepts of health and stewardship," says Martha Cooper, freshwater program director for TNC in New Mexico. "Using a variety of hands-on tests, we investigated—and celebrated - the great water quality in the Navajo River."



## Colorado River Multi-State Trustee Gathering

This year we held the first-ever Colorado River Multi-State Trustee Gathering to learn more about the Colorado River Program and meet trustees from throughout the Basin states and colleagues from Mexico. The gathering was an opportunity to learn how effective TNC can be when we work across business unit boundaries and how TNC is uniquely positioned to have an impact at multiple scales in the Colorado River Basin.

The gathering took place in Steamboat Springs, CO and provided opportunities to learn, socialize and network. We heard from TNC leaders and participated in substantive sessions on the Conservancy's Colorado River work. The weekend was both inspiring and energizing. One participant noted, "You could absolutely feel the collective energy that everyone brought to this gathering and took home with them."

TOP TO BOTTOM Kernza® hay field; cows grazing on Kernza® © Wendel Hann OPPOSITE PAGE LEFT TO RIGHT San Juan River © Jason Houston; NM state director Terry Sullivan speaks to TNC staff and trustees. © Kelli Harrington/TNC

## Santa Fe Canyon Preserve: Trail Upgrades and New Audio Tour

The Nature Conservancy's Santa Fe Canyon Preserve boasts 525 acres of conserved open lands just a few miles from Santa Fe's historic downtown plaza. With an annual visitation of more than 35,000, the preserve offers a chance to hike and experience nature just a stone's throw from the city center.

Recently, TNC has invested in several enhancements to the preserve and the 1.5-mile loop trail, adding new interpretive signage, making a portion of the pathway more accessible to people of all abilities and creating a downloadable audio tour to guide you through the preserve. You are invited to come out and enjoy our new upgrades, download the audio tour and learn more about the history of the preserve and our conservation work throughout New Mexico.

**LEARN MORE:** [nature.org/santafe](https://nature.org/santafe)



## Creating Hope with Taos Pueblo

### John Waconda reflects, briefly, in silence, and then he smiles:

"The moments I love most are when I feel the excitement take hold among our tribal partners as we realize that, together, we can think bigger than ever before—it's a moment of creating hope." Waconda, of Isleta Pueblo and Laguna Pueblo, is TNC New Mexico's Indigenous partnerships program manager. He is also often the leader who is sharing TNC's capacity and resources with Tribal partners.

Most recently, some of Waconda's most hope-filled work is emerging from TNC's partnership with Taos Pueblo in northern New Mexico. One project focuses on Taos Pueblo Blue Lake Wilderness Area, which holds deep cultural and religious importance to the Taos tribe. This heavily forested area in the Taos Mountains is increasingly vulnerable to impacts from trespassers and risks from mega-fire. TNC is working with Taos Pueblo to develop a new forest management plan that restores traditional cultural fire practices and provides funding and training for Tribal rangers who can protect the land's health and integrity.

"It's inspiring to see our progress on reintroducing cultural fire, which has huge significance for the



tribe, reduces fuel build-up and promotes ecosystem health," says Waconda.

"TNC is offering training opportunities and resources and we're supporting the network that many tribes are creating for themselves around this important issue."

Waconda is also enthusiastic about supporting another valuable element of Taos Pueblo life and culture: buffalo. Buffalo have lived on Taos Pueblo lands for many decades, but the community is now ready to expand their herd and move it to a new area within their Tribal land. TNC is helping to design a management and grazing plan and fund new fencing and water infrastructure for the herd. The plan includes a monitoring phase that will allow Taos Pueblo and TNC to track the impact of the bison, learning more about how their presence benefits native plant growth and soil health.

Waconda notes that he, TNC, and Taos Pueblo are really just getting started. "We're still planning, building capacity and raising awareness. These are lands and traditions that have existed forever. TNC's vision is about sustaining a culture and returning health to these lands forever as well."





The Nature Conservancy  
New Mexico Chapter  
1613 Paseo de Peralta, Suite 200  
Santa Fe, NM 87501

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Planting tree seedlings in the Hermits Peak/Calf Canyon fire burn scar © Roberto Rosales



# Create Your Conservation Legacy.

What better legacy is there to leave than your commitment to protecting the Earth for future generations? Whether you are taking the first steps toward planning your estate or are in the process of updating your estate plan, The Nature Conservancy is here to help.

## CONTACT US TODAY.

(877) 812-3698 | [legacy@tnc.org](mailto:legacy@tnc.org) | [nature.org/legacy](http://nature.org/legacy)

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