



# **RIO GRANDE WATER FUND** WILDFIRE & WATER SOURCE PROTECTION



▶ **2022 ANNUAL REPORT**

# Since launching the RGWF our numbers add up:

Collectively, with all partners, we have:

**251,000**  
acres of forest  
restoration activities

**103** signatories  
**1,500** jobs supported

**159,000**  
acres in the  
restoration footprint

**\$130 Million**  
in economic impact

**\$5.3 Million**  
in private dollars invested

**5** counties contributing  
to RGWF

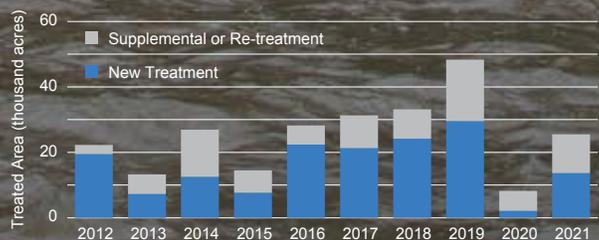
**50+** projects funded

**\$52.8 Million**  
in public funding leveraged

Risk Reduction through Ecological Restoration



Expanding the Footprint of Resilient Forest



Data for U.S. Forest Service treatments were accessed 9/16/2022 from the Natural Resource Manager (NRM) Forest Activity Tracking System (FACTS). Department of Interior agency treatment data were accessed 9/16/2022 from the National Fire Plan Operations & Reporting System (NFPORS). Treatments on private lands and treatments funded by the RGWF missing from FACTS or NFPORS were added from RGWF records.

## ▶ Message from the Executive Committee

What began as a year full of promise and opportunity has transformed into a heartbreaking moment of grief and soul-searching. For the first time in a long time, funding is available in amounts that make it possible to get restoration work done at a scale that will have measurable benefits for water users in the Upper Rio Grande Basin. But in the same moment, an especially catastrophic fire season is testing our collective will to get that work done safely and effectively.

This has been a hellish year for wildfire in New Mexico. In particular, the devastating Calf Canyon/Hermits Peak wildfire has hurt thousands of our family, friends and neighbors on the east slope of the Sangres, destroying homes and wreaking havoc on watersheds. For the affected communities, the impact of this fire will be felt for decades to come. It is a sobering reminder of what's at stake when we talk about wildfire and water source protection, not to mention the challenges and risks associated with doing the work to address the wildfire crisis.

While much focus is rightly on the human and ecological impacts of the state's largest wildfire in history, we saw a few bright spots where forest treatments within the Rio Grande Water Fund landscape contributed to mitigating wildfire effects. One example was the Midnight Fire on the El Rito Ranger District of the Carson National Forest. Previous treatments and managed wildfires all contributed to form a "catcher's mitt" that pushed the Midnight Fire to the ground where firefighters could better control it and stopped it from making a northeast run to the communities of Vallecitos and Canon Plaza. The All Hands All Lands (AHAL) team, a RGWF project led by the Forest Stewards Guild, supported prescribed burns bordering the Midnight fire in 2018 and 2021 that the Midnight Fire ran directly into. In fact, AHAL resources made up greater than 50% of the resources on a key treatment in 2018, the Alamosa prescribed burn.

We acknowledge that this is a tense moment. It is moments like this when we need to avoid retreating into our silos and instead lean into the power of our collaboratives. Since 2014, the Rio Grande Water Fund has laid the groundwork for finding common ground, pooling resources and building momentum for source water protection. We have made a difference for our communities and shown that when we work together, we can address seemingly intractable challenges. Now is the time for open, honest dialogue about what comes next. The impacts of climate change are accelerating and we cannot afford to slacken the pace of watershed restoration. We have proven solutions we can utilize and the know-how to develop new approaches as necessary. We look forward to another year of the RGWF and our continued, shared success.

### EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

**Brian Burnett**, CEO, BGB Consulting - *Chair*

**Janie Chermak**, Professor of Economics, University of New Mexico

**Paula Garcia**, Executive Director, New Mexico Acequia Association

**Mark Kelly**, Water Resources Division Manager, Albuquerque  
Bernalillo Water Utility Authority

**J.R. Logan**, Owner, Del Medio Forestry - *Vice Chair*

**Michiko Martin**, Regional Forester, Southwest Region,  
U.S. Forest Service

**Laura McCarthy**, State Forester, New Mexico Forestry Division

**Matt Piccarello**, Forest & Watershed Health Manager, The  
Nature Conservancy

## What is the Rio Grande Water Fund?

The Rio Grande Water Fund (RGWF) is a public-private partnership with a goal of generating sustainable funding for a 20-year program of large-scale forest restoration treatments, including: thinning overgrown forests, reforestation, managing fire, restoring wetlands and streams, educating youth, providing research to policy makers and creating forestry and wood products jobs.



## ► Natural Solutions for Santa Clara Pueblo

Over the past 25 years, Santa Clara Pueblo has experienced several large-scale wildfires and subsequent debris flows. These events have burned nearly 80% of their Tribal forests, scoured riparian habitat, destroyed canyon infrastructure and resulted in the loss of nearly 100% of fish habitat and population.

The Santa Clara Creek is located both physically and culturally at the center of this landscape, and due to the magnitude of these events, has been closed to public access for 17 of the last 21 years because of enduring hazards. This has resulted in an enormous cultural disconnect, particularly for the most recent generation, leaving elders with a sense of despair for their beloved canyon and spiritual sanctuary.

Despite such impacts, the Tribe and its Forestry Department have evolved to meet these challenges, while emerging as a leader in developing forest and watershed resilience. The Forestry Department, with continued support from Governor J. Michael Chavarria, has developed a *Naturalistic Approach to Watershed Restoration* that relies heavily on maximizing ecosystem services to promote habitat diversity and develop resilience to future disturbances.

This begins with recognizing natural processes that provide benefits, then promoting them through nature-based solutions and Indigenous traditional ecological knowledge. This multi-benefits approach includes utilizing local natural materials such as rock, woody debris or seed sources, then tying into natural processes, such as natural fire cycles with prescribed fire, floodplain connectivity for attenuating

flood energy, or nucleation planting for more effective forest regeneration.

Santa Clara Forestry began by implementing a top-down approach to restoring the Santa Clara Creek Watershed. This began with developing fuel breaks along watershed boundaries and then transitioned to erosion control in watershed tributaries.

Key features, such as relic wetlands and beaver ponds, were enhanced with bio-fencing that utilizes woody debris to limit grazing pressure. Headwaters stream segments were supplemented with natural channel features to develop habitat diversity and complexity for the reintroduction of native Rio Grande cutthroat trout. These efforts were supported by the Western Native Trout Initiative, Trout Unlimited, National Fish and Wildlife Federation and FEMA.

The Tribe continues to build upon these efforts by adopting multi-year funding agreements with the U.S. Forest Service and National Park Service, enabling co-stewardship on neighboring federal lands. This includes adjacent lands identified by the Tribal Forest Protection Act and also extends across the landscape through Santa Clara's involvement in the 2-3-2 Partnership and the Rio Chama Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program.

Overall, these projects work collectively to restore ecosystem services in the critical headwaters for this stream that provides a clean, reliable water source to the Pueblo and its downstream users along the Rio Grande.



## ▶ Saving the Seedlings

Since 2019, The Nature Conservancy (TNC) and the RGWF have been working on a climate-smart reforestation project in the Jemez Mountains funded by the Wildlife Conservation Society's Climate Adaptation Fund. Despite setbacks due to the pandemic, TNC and partners including Santa Clara Pueblo, New Mexico State University, New Mexico Highlands University, Bandelier National Monument and the Santa Fe National Forest have planted 100,000 seedlings in high severity burn patches within the Los Conchas burn scar.

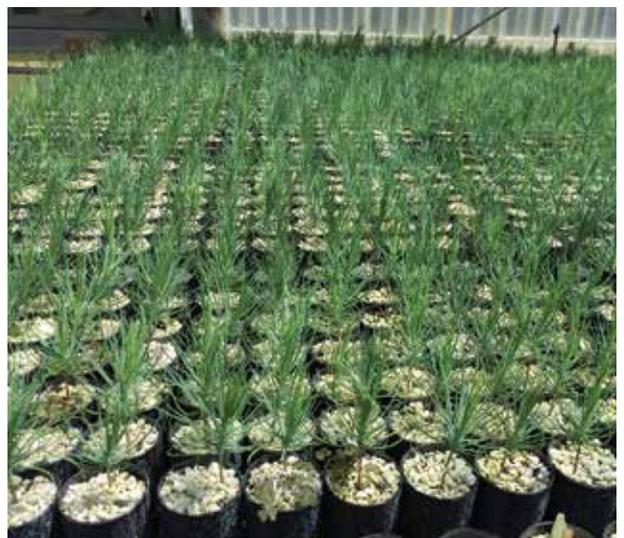
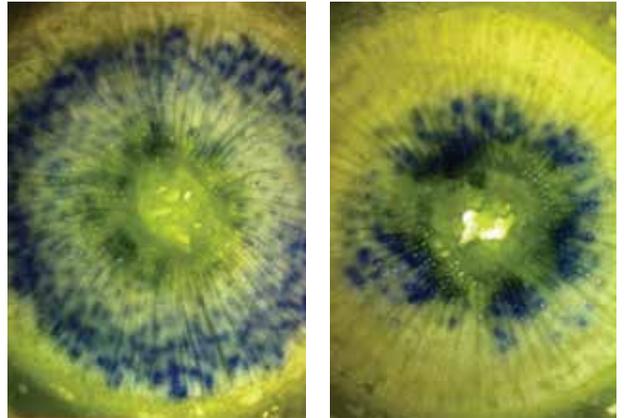
The project is using novel methods to choose planting sites based on the modeling of projected future climate and a nucleation planting strategy that groups up to 400 trees together in fixed radius plots. The seedlings are also being drought-hardened in the nursery, increasing their chances of survival. We aim to use what we learn from this planting approach to improve and inform future reforestation efforts.

Unfortunately, the 2022 Cerro Pelado wildfire burned over several of the planting sites and many seedlings did not survive. The Calf Canyon/Hermits Peak wildfire, which was simultaneously burning in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, may have been an even bigger threat. The remaining seedlings to be planted in the Jemez Mountains and other sites throughout the Southwest were being grown at the John T. Harrington Forestry Research Center in Mora, New Mexico.

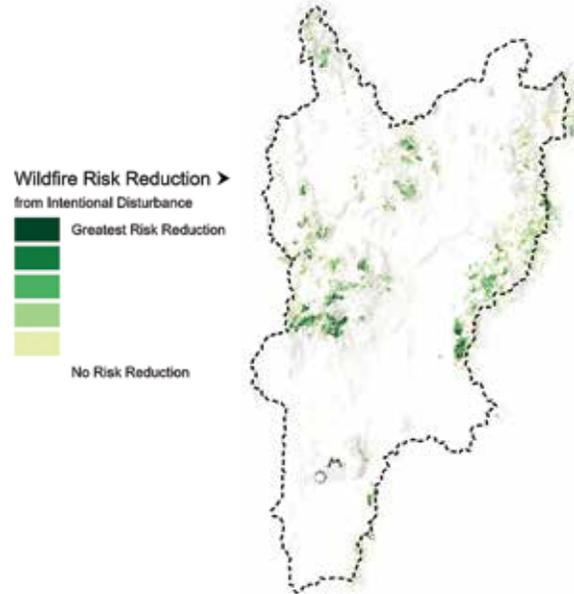
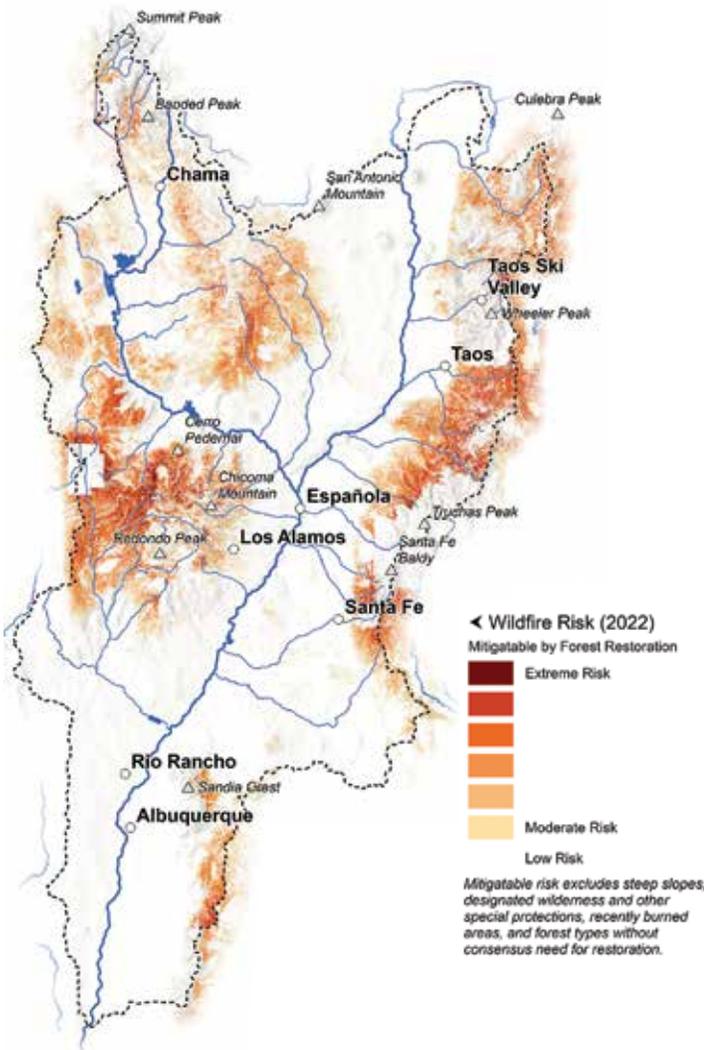
While the wildfire raged on the nearby hillside, a heroic effort was underway to rescue tree seeds and seedlings from the research center by staff from NM State Forestry and NM State University. All told, more than 71,000 seedlings were moved in trailers from Mora to a temporary nursery in Santa Fe.

This event amplifies the urgency of increasing nursery capacity to scale up our reforestation efforts in New Mexico. The success of the seedling rescue highlights the resiliency of our collaborative efforts, especially to help in times of crisis. In order to meet the reforestation need for the state, we need more robust and dispersed climate smart nursery infrastructure. We are working to build a more robust reforestation infrastructure through multiple ongoing efforts, including the creation of a NM reforestation center.

Pooling resources and tackling big challenges together has been at the heart of the RGWF since its inception. While this story highlights that the pace at which we need to work is accelerating due to climate change, it also shows that when partners work together, we can solve big problems quickly. Even if that means moving an entire forest.



## ▶ New Map Shows Effectiveness



Wildfires driven by fierce winds through dry overgrown forests threaten our communities and the natural systems on which they depend. A new map of wildfire risk developed by the RGWF along with fire and risk modeling experts at Pyrologix, a wildfire threat assessment research firm, shows the places in our watershed where wildfire poses the greatest risk to the resources and assets we value. The southern Sangre de Cristo Mountains, Jemez Mountains and the source watersheds in the San Juan-Chama Project in the San Juan Mountains are all very high risk.

Risk is highest where both the likelihood of high-intensity fire is high and where resources and assets that can be damaged by fire—such as homes and watersheds—are densely concentrated. The high risk in the Jemez Mountains is due to extreme likelihood of high intensity wildfire. The high risk in the southern Sangre de Cristo mountains is due to the combined influence of relatively high densities of

watersheds and homes, and high likelihood of high intensity wildfire. The high risk in the San Juan-Chama Project source watersheds is due to extreme concentrations of resource value, particularly water provisioning ecosystem services, which produces very high-risk estimates despite relatively low expected likelihood of high-intensity wildfire.

The likelihood of high-intensity wildfire is driven by contiguous, homogeneous stands of overgrown forest that are highly susceptible to high-intensity wildfire. Forest restoration treatments such as thinning and prescribed fire seek to restore a heterogeneous structure, which reduces wildfire risk. The effectiveness of these treatments is visible in the new risk map, when compared to risk modeled with a landscape representing the landscape in 2012.

The largest changes in risk occur in places where wildfires burned in the intervening years, but the effects of intentional treatments are also visible, especially in the places where treatments have been concentrated. Two areas where the landscape-scale effects of concentrated risk reduction treatments are readily apparent are the southern Jemez Mountains and the Santa Fe municipal watershed where concentrated investment in restoration has dramatically decreased risk.

Significant wildfire risk remains in the Rio Grande Watershed. While we can't mitigate all this risk with ecological forest restoration, with continued investment in restoring dry forests to resilient structure and returning fire to the landscape in conjunction with fire-wise practices, we can build resilience to future wildfire.

# ▶ Indigenous Partnerships Prevail

BY JOHN WACONDA



Ma' gu wam'. Greetings.

In September 2021, when I was hired as TNC New Mexico's Indigenous Partnerships Program Director, I engaged in what I believe to be the most rewarding job anyone could have the fortune of being granted. I have not been disappointed. Over the past few months, I've had the opportunity to renew and create important Tribal partner relationships focused on the core of my personal life as an Isleta Pueblo farmer, protecting the Rio Grande River.

I grew up and reside on the Pueblo of Isleta Reservation, located in the lower RGWF footprint, and am blessed to live a traditional agricultural life that my family and community continue, all because of the sacred earth, land and water. In my TNC role, I have begun a mission that matches the perseverance of my people protecting our precious river, because without it we would not survive. This past year, enormous challenges transpired and continued for all of us, personally, as well as in my work for the RGWF, engaging in conservation partnerships with Tribal entities.

First, the Covid pandemic challenges faced by our Native communities in New Mexico have changed priorities and created new ones to address in our ability to maintain our lives, health, culture and tradition. Nature's importance in our lives was reawakened when we became socially isolated. Tribal members were reminded of the importance of sustainability and other values of their cultures. Unfortunately, life aspects that have sustained our Pueblos for centuries — ceremonial, social, family and communal interaction — were heavily impacted by the pandemic and tribal communities are still recovering.

Secondly, climate change, drought, wildfire and other natural events occurring this year have increased the awareness of the need, scale and importance of our Tribal conservation work. Supporting conservation and restoration goals and opportunities on Tribal lands is my priority. Through the RGWF, the Indigenous Peoples Burning Network and partnerships with New Mexico Pueblos, we are strengthening tribal capacity and creating opportunities for Tribal staff to assist in the planning and implementation of cultural and traditional fire use. An important aspect of this work is post-fire recovery on Tribal lands: addressing erosion, water quality, flood response and revegetation needs.

Tribal communities agree that the Rio Grande needs attention, whether in response to drought, maintaining water quality, water for wildlife or our way of life, it's important we work together. I am fortunate to contribute towards this effort, and value the dedication, energy and commitment within the RGWF. Strengthening our partnerships with Tribes and working together to protect the Rio Grande and the communities that depend on the river is the only way forward.

## PARTNER SPOTLIGHT



### KAY MATTHEWS

Kay Matthews has lived in New Mexico all of her adult life and, among other things, is the Secretary of the Rio de Las Trampas Forest Council. Kay moved from Placitas to a 10-acre farm in El Valle in 1992 where she and her family grew hay, planted an orchard and raised garlic and raspberries for market.

Kay is the editor of *La Jicarita*, an online journal of environmental politics and has been covering forestry issues since the paper's inception in 1996. Before helping establish the Trampas Forest Council in 2019, Kay and her family participated in the Camino Real Ranger District of the Carson National Forest's contract stewardship program, which inspired the leñero program.

Over next few years, Kay will help the Council train and hire a large workforce of leñeros to help thin overgrown forests near her community and provide firewood to those who need it. Kay believes that collaborative projects such as this leñero program are essential to achieving the goal of greater forest resiliency in this time of climate crisis.

## ▶ ABCWUA: Ongoing Support Accelerates Forest Restoration

A new 10-year funding agreement with the Albuquerque Bernalillo County Water Utility Authority (ABCWUA) will accelerate forest and watershed restoration in the Rio Grande watershed, primarily in the San Juan Chama Project source watersheds.

The RGWF was founded with the intent of spurring downstream communities to invest in the restoration and resilience of their source watersheds. This investment from ABCWUA connects the largest water utility and the people it serves to the forests from which the water they use flows, giving them a voice in the future of their watershed.

Drought and wildfire threaten water supplies for people and nature in the Rio Grande watershed, and landscape-scale forest and watershed restoration is the key conservation approach to mitigating these risks. ABCWUA's forward thinking 2120 Water Resources Management Strategy identifies these activities as essential for securing resilience for water supplies.

ABCWUA has been a critical partner, signatory and funder of the RGWF since 2014, and this new funding agreement will amplify the work of the water fund, allowing the RGWF to implement treatments in high-value parts of the watershed and attract additional state and federal funding.

This agreement exemplifies the collaboration between upstream forest managers and downstream water users that is required for long-term resilience of our forested headwaters and the communities that depend on them.



### SPOTLIGHT



### MEET MARK KELLY

Mark Kelly has been working on forestry and fire in New Mexico since he spent a summer working as a wildland firefighter for NM State Forestry back in 2003. More recently, he has been working on watershed issues for the Albuquerque Bernalillo County Water Authority Utility for the last two years. Mark has been a leader championing the RGWF's work with the ABCWUA.

Mark says he hopes the RGWF continues to work on improving our watershed health initiatives. "We're all in this together and working together is paramount," he said.



## ► Building Community Support for Wetlands

Over the last 200 years, New Mexico has lost more than a third of its wetlands. To prepare watersheds for future climate changes and new disturbances, we must restore the structure and function of the most vulnerable, foundational and biodiverse watershed element — riparian areas, the lands along rivers and streams.

Climate predictions forecast that wet environments will get wetter and dry ones will get drier. This is becoming more visible as we witness aridification with reduced rainfall and snowpack, earlier snowmelt and increased severity of droughts and wildfires. For people, this also means less water for basic human needs.

The Rio Grande Water Fund is working to achieve the scale required to secure water for the future in New Mexico. We are collaborating on projects with shared goals, partnering across agencies and jurisdictions, allowing for peer-to-peer learning and improving focused coordination. In practice, it can be challenging and often more time-intensive to incorporate multi-agency goals, but ultimately it is more rewarding when we persist in solving problems together, and achieve our mutual outcomes, all while learning new approaches that can inform and amplify the impact of our work.

A successful example of this kind of collaboration is the Harvey Jones Bioswale Project in Corrales. This public-private, multi-year partnership reconnects native vegetation in a historic floodplain with groundwater by creating a series of channels that naturally filter pollutants from stormwater before it is carried into the Rio Grande. These wetland channels slowly filter water and improve 10 acres of riparian habitat for fish, birds and other wildlife. The wetlands utilize existing waterflows on site, which include a wastewater outfall for the City of Rio Rancho, releasing 4-5 million gallons of water each day and significant stormwater runoff, bringing in an additional average of 4.5 million gallons each year.

This project also serves as an important demonstration site in a popular spot for recreationists, showcasing the many benefits of multi-agency coordination and green stormwater infrastructure to communities in the greater Albuquerque area. We aim to use this project as a model of what can be done to scale up our work. Big thanks to all our partners!



## ► Welcome New Executive Committee Members



We are thrilled and honored to welcome new committee members J.R. Logan and Brian Burnett. With their leadership as well as other Executive Committee members, we hope to expand our reach and engagement with partners.

J.R. founded Del Medio Forestry, LLC to help grow the Taos County restoration economy. His understanding of forest restoration, nonprofit management and keen sense of the value of strong community partnerships will help us better address workforce issues, create opportunities for

sustainable jobs and strengthen the invaluable partnerships that are key to increasing the pace, scale and quality of forest restoration.

“I’d like to ensure that the RGWF continues to build meaningful partnerships across the Rio Grande basin and remains a reliable source of funding for partners who care about improving the resiliency of our watersheds,” he said. “The RGWF is more than just another pot of money for water source protection. The RGWF is a forum for collaboration and problem solving, as well as a strong advocate for active, science-based management of our forested lands.”

Brian’s leadership experience, including serving as the CEO for Bohannon Huston for 15 years supporting some of NM’s largest infrastructure projects, and his commitment to helping preserve our state’s water resources will be an invaluable support to the RGWF.

During his career, he served as chair of Governor Richardson’s Blue Ribbon Water Task Force for almost eight years and chair of the Albuquerque’s Business Water Task Force for two decades. His focus has been on sound policy that addresses the economics, ownership and use of the state’s precious water resources.



“The RGWF must continue to tap into and leverage all types of funding sources, so that the many excellent strategies to improve the watershed can be implemented,” he said. “We must also be on the lookout for new entities who share the same passion and vision for the RGWF as our outstanding existing partners do. I strongly believe that the RGWF is one of New Mexico’s best examples of turning a big vision into reality!”

## PARTNER SPOTLIGHT



### PAGE BUONO

Page is a multimedia storyteller and facilitator. For the past five years, she’s worked with the Mountain Studies Institute and as an independent contractor to facilitate cross-boundary collaboration between diverse stakeholders in northern New Mexico and southwest Colorado. Through her work, she communicates important stories about partners and their efforts to create a more resilient landscape in southwest Colorado and northern New Mexico.

In 2019, the imminent need for access to fuelwood for Navajo Nation communities inspired a group of individuals from the Navajo Nation, Jemez Pueblo, Santa Clara Pueblo, U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, NM State Forestry and private land partners to pursue both short- and long-term coordinated planning efforts. With support from the 2-3-2 and San Juan-Chama Watershed Partnerships, Page facilitated the group and together with partners of the Northern New Mexico Fuelwood Working Group secured delivery and access to hundreds of chords of wood. This laid the foundation for improved, long-term ability of Tribes and Pueblos to reliably access fuelwood resources on their ancestral lands.

# ▶ Thanks to RGWF Investors

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- Albuquerque Bernalillo County Water Utility Authority
- Albuquerque Community Foundation, Vitality Works Endowment
- Albuquerque Metropolitan Arroyo Flood Control Authority
- Anne Ray Foundation
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