The Nature Conservancy



# New Mexico

2026 Year in Review

# A letter from the state director



Dear Friends,

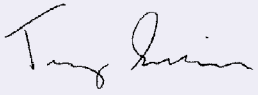
This is my 22nd and final letter to you as state director. I will be transitioning away from my current role in January, 2027 and will be moving into a different role within TNC as a senior conservation advisor, where my primary focus will be to help complete and support some of our ongoing New Mexico conservation projects.

There is one word that comes to my mind as I write this annual message: **GRATITUDE.** I am so grateful for the incredible opportunities that I have had over the past 34 years with TNC (including 21 years as state director) to immerse myself in magical landscapes, living rivers, and hidden valleys, and to witness the astonishing array of wildlife in our Land of Enchantment. But just as importantly, I am so thankful for the extraordinary people who have made this journey unforgettable, and I want to thank you for your incredible support and passion for conserving and protecting our planet.

I am so thankful for the DNA and the sprit that has driven our New Mexico program to great heights. From some of our earliest projects, such as the 220,000-acre Seviletta National Wildlife Refuge in the 1970s, to the 320,000-acre Gray Ranch in the early 1990s, to the Rancho El Uno and the 1-million-acre Janos Grasslands Biosphere Reserve in the early 2000s, our New Mexico team has consistently strived for tangible, large-scale conservation projects that have generational impact. And as you will see in this report, we have continued to harness and apply that philosophy to a wider spectrum of impactful conservation initiatives. The most recent shining manifestation is our acquisition of the extraordinary 50,000-acre Dawson Elk Valley Ranch and the creation of an innovative Tribal Coalition that will steward the property. The hallmarks of our work are tried and true: use the best conservation science, work with a wide array of partners, and harness tremendous resources to accomplish BIG things.

Thank you for your partnership, your generosity and your commitment to protecting New Mexico's natural heritage. The successes we celebrate today belong to all of us, and we are deeply grateful to have you as part of this work.

With gratitude,



Terry Sullivan, *state director*



**COVER** Dawson Elk Valley Ranch © David Emery
**ABOVE** Terry Sullivan © Jenna Schoenefeld

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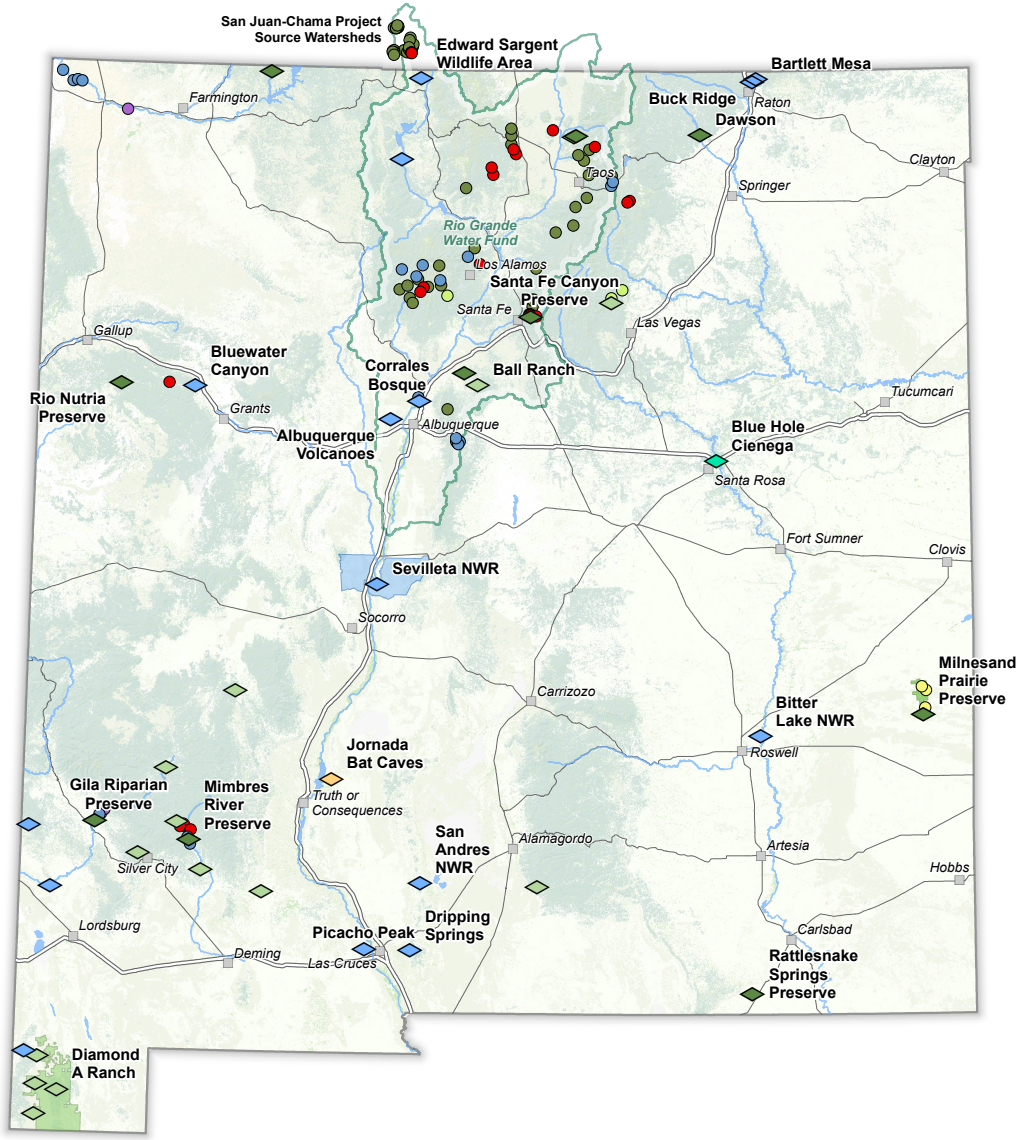
TNC New Mexico

# Where We Work




**Land Protection**
- Assist
- Easement
- Mineral Rights
- Preserve
- Transfer

**Improved Management**
- Wetland Restoration
- Environmental Flows
- Controlled Burn
- Thinning
- Range Enhancement
- Reforestation

**TOP TO BOTTOM** Hummingbird © John Duncan/TNC; Gila River Preserve © Erika Nortemann/TNC; Lesser prairie-chicken ©Alan W. Eckert

# Collaborative conservation

## The Dawson Elk Valley Ranch project

One of the most significant conservation achievements for The Nature Conservancy in New Mexico in recent years is taking shape in Colfax County, where TNC has acquired the Dawson Elk Valley Ranch, a 50,039-acre landscape known for its exceptional wildlife habitat, critical watershed resources, and rich cultural history. The acquisition represents a once-in-a-generation opportunity to protect an iconic landscape while creating a new path for conservation and Indigenous stewardship.

"This project represents the many strengths of The Nature Conservancy," says Terry Sullivan, New Mexico state director. "It brings together our science, land protection prowess and commitment to working in partnership with Tribal Nations into an amazing opportunity to conserve a very special part of New Mexico."

Located near Cimarron in northeast New Mexico, the ranch encompasses a remarkably diverse landscape from ponderosa pine and pinyon-juniper woodlands to expansive shortgrass prairie. The Vermejo River flows for approximately 18 miles through the ranch, nourishing wetlands, meadows and riparian habitats that are increasingly rare in the arid Southwest.

The conservation value of the Dawson Elk Valley Ranch extends well beyond its boundaries. The property is surrounded on three sides by Ted Turner's 550,000-acre Vermejo Park Ranch, and to the east of the ranch is a corridor of protected lands extending through the southern high plains of New Mexico, Colorado, Kansas, Oklahoma and Texas. It supports a myriad of flora and fauna, including eight endangered species, 24 threatened species, and a large herd of elk. The ranch also contains a large portion of the Vermejo River watershed, a source of clean water that benefits communities across eastern New Mexico and the Texas panhandle.

Equally important is the cultural significance of the landscape. The mountains, forests, rivers and grasslands of northern New Mexico were part of the ancestral homelands of many Indigenous peoples. The area contains places of cultural importance and reflects generations of connection between Tribal communities and the land. Protecting these lands helps preserve opportunities to honor and recognize that deep cultural heritage.

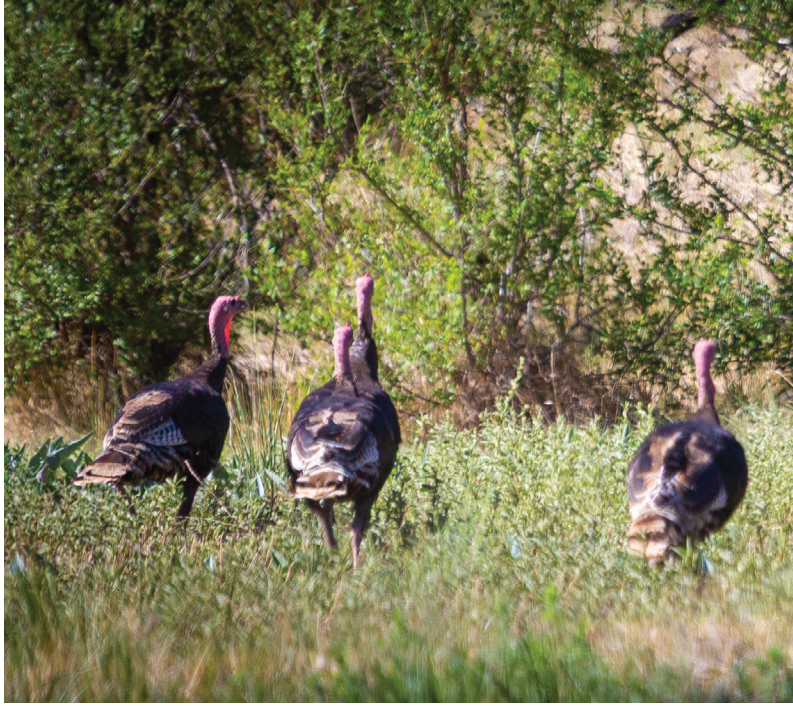
Together with partners from the New Mexico Forestry Division, the U.S. Forest Service, and a coalition of Tribal Nations and Pueblos, TNC is working to develop a long-term plan for the property that includes transfer of the 32,000-acre forested part of the ranch to the State Forest Service to be co-managed with the Tribal Coalition. While plans continue to take shape for the future of the landscape, the Dawson Elk Valley Ranch project stands as a powerful example of what collaborative conservation can achieve.

"This project is an extraordinary example of a new vision for long-term conservation of large landscapes," adds Sullivan. "While we are still at the beginning of a long journey, we feel assured that this new approach to collaboratively protecting large landscapes for people and for nature will provide lasting benefits for future generations."

By protecting vital wildlife habitat, conserving critical water resources and honoring Tribal connections to the land, the Dawson Elk Valley Ranch project demonstrates an innovative and comprehensive approach to stewardship that benefits both people and nature.

**CLOCKWISE** Elk running through Dawson Elk Valley Ranch © David Emery; Wild turkeys at Dawson Elk Valley Ranch © David Emery; Dawson Elk Valley Ranch © David Emery







"It brings together our science, land protection prowess and commitment to working in partnership with Tribal Nations into an amazing opportunity to conserve a very special part of New Mexico."

TERRY SULLIVAN
*State Director*

# More than conservation

## Indigenous stewardship at Dawson Elk Valley Ranch



**"For me, this has always been about bringing people back to the land. Conservation gives us an opportunity to protect a place, but Indigenous stewardship gives us an opportunity to restore a relationship."**

ROSE GILDERSLEEVE, *Indigenous partnerships manager for The Nature Conservancy in New Mexico*

## Since time immemorial, Indigenous peoples have lived with and cared for the landscapes of northeastern New Mexico. These lands have sustained generations of people, culture, and tradition—and in return, Indigenous communities have carried a deep responsibility to care for them.

At Dawson Elk Valley Ranch, those connections remain.

The conservation of this remarkable landscape presents an opportunity to protect nearly 50,000 acres of forests, grasslands, wildlife habitat and waters. But from the beginning, the vision for Dawson Elk Valley Ranch has been about something larger than conserving acres.

It is about reconnecting people and place.

Over the past several months, Tribal leaders and representatives from across the region have come together to envision what Indigenous stewardship could look like on the ranch. Those conversations have included everything from fire and forest management to wildlife, cultural resources, youth engagement, traditional practices and opportunities to bring Tribal citizens back onto the land.

Out of that work, the Mountain Plains Inter-Tribal Coalition (MPIC) was formed—a new Tribal-led coalition made up of nine Tribal Nations and Pueblos, with additional Nations considering membership.

While each participating Tribe brings its own distinct history, culture, knowledge and relationship with this landscape, they share a commitment to its future. Together, the Coalition is creating a framework through which Tribal Nations can move beyond consultation and into an active, lasting role in the stewardship and management of the land.

That distinction matters.

For generations, Indigenous peoples have carried knowledge about how to live with and care for these landscapes. The opportunity at Dawson Elk Valley Ranch is to create space for that knowledge to help guide what comes next—not as an addition to conservation, but as an essential part of it.

The possibilities extend far beyond the boundaries of the ranch. Dawson Elk Valley Ranch offers an opportunity to demonstrate a different approach to conservation—one that protects habitat and wildlife while also honoring cultural connections, supporting Indigenous leadership, and creating pathways for Tribal communities to reconnect with and steward culturally significant landscapes.

The hope is that what is being built here can help inform similar efforts elsewhere.

"For me, this has always been about bringing people back to the land," says Rose Gildersleeve, Indigenous partnerships manager for The Nature Conservancy in New Mexico. "Conservation gives us an opportunity to protect a place, but Indigenous stewardship gives us an opportunity to restore a relationship."

The future of Dawson Elk Valley Ranch will ultimately be measured by more than the number of acres protected. It will be measured by the relationships restored, the knowledge carried forward, the young people who have opportunities to learn on the land, and the ability of Tribal Nations to help shape the future of a place their peoples have known for generations.

This is conservation—but it is also reconnection, responsibility and reciprocity.

It is about protecting a landscape while restoring something equally important: the relationship between people and place.



**PHOTOS** Dawson Elk Valley Ranch © David Emery

# Building healthier forests and stronger communities

Across New Mexico, forests that once evolved with frequent, low-intensity fire are facing a growing list of challenges. Climate change is creating hotter temperatures, rapid aridification, insect outbreaks and more severe wildfires which are reshaping landscapes that provide wildlife habitat, safe drinking water and countless benefits to nearby communities. As the need for restoration grows, partnerships that bring additional people, expertise and resources to the ground are helping restore forest health and prepare these landscapes for the future.

This year, The Nature Conservancy helped meet that need through a partnership with the U.S. Forest Service that is supporting forest restoration and wildfire mitigation work across three national forests in New Mexico, including the Santa Fe, Cibola and Carson National Forests.

"Having spent years fighting wildfires, I know how stretched thin agencies can be during fire season," says Will Joy, prescribed fire specialist for for TNC in New Mexico. "The same time of year that's best for many restoration and mitigation projects is often when crews are needed on wildfires. By providing trained staff to help with this work, we're helping keep important restoration projects moving forward while agencies focus on protecting communities and responding to fires."

TNC fire teams are working alongside U.S. Forest Service staff to help forests become healthier and more resilient to severe wildfire. Across the Santa Fe, Cibola and Carson National Forests, crews are clearing dense vegetation that can fuel larger, hotter fires and preparing sites for restoration work like prescribed burns. They are also creating and maintaining cleared areas that help fire personnel safely manage prescribed fires and respond to wildfires. Together, these efforts are helping restore more natural forest conditions and reduce the risk of destructive wildfire.

Those benefits reach far beyond the trees. When a high-severity wildfire burns through a forest, it can trigger erosion. The resulting runoff can severely damage rivers and streams and impact the watersheds supplying drinking water to communities across New Mexico.

"Getting to collaborate with TNC in New Mexico and the Forest Service to assist with burn unit prep for the fall and winter season was really rewarding," says Melanie Schmidt, the prescribed fire module leader for TNC. "It's always satisfying when we can work across various regions of the state and build relationships with local resources. Knowing that our efforts on the Carson, Santa Fe and Cibola National Forests will aid in future prescribed fire always makes the work feel worth it as well."

Forest restoration is a long-term effort, and no single organization can do it alone. By bringing additional hands, expertise and resources to the field, these partnerships are helping forests better withstand wildfire while supporting the wildlife, water resources and communities that depend on them for years to come.








# Rooted in resilience: Scaling Western forest restoration

The Nature Conservancy's **Western Dry Forests Program** is bringing together experts in forestry, fire, Indigenous knowledge, ecology and policy to help forests adapt to hotter, drier conditions and increasingly severe wildfires. By fostering collaboration across federal, state and organizational boundaries, the program is accelerating forest restoration across the West.

We're conducting ecological thinning, controlled burning and other science-based management practices to help overgrown forests in 11 Western states become more resilient to severe wildfire, drought and other stressors.

The program has improved more than **3.2 million acres** in a four-year span, an area equivalent to four Yosemite National Parks.

**LEARN MORE** ▸ To learn more, visit **nature.org/WesternDryForests**.

**CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT** Carson National Forest © Hannah Boyer; Santa Fe National Forest © Sonya Kaufman; Carson National Forest © Hannah Boyer



# Protecting water for New Mexico communities at its source

Long before it reaches a household tap in New Mexico, water begins its journey high in the mountains. Snowmelt travels through forests and streams, eventually supplying the rivers and reservoirs on which millions of people rely. As wildfire, aridification and other pressures threaten these forests, protecting them is important, now more than ever, to protect the water they provide. And as those challenges increase, meeting them often takes collaboration among landowners, conservation organizations and public agencies.

A nearly 900-acre forest restoration project on the Knight Ranch near Chromo, Colorado, is one example of how landowners and conservation organizations are working together to reduce those risks. Located within the source area of the San Juan-Chama Project, the ranch sits in a watershed that helps supply water to more than one million people, including residents of Albuquerque and Santa Fe. The project, led by The Nature Conservancy in partnership with landowner Tucker Knight, aims to make the forest healthier and more resilient before the next major wildfire strikes.

Knight, who owns several ranches in the area, believes ranching and conservation can go hand in hand. On the Knight Ranch, he's putting that into practice by thinning overcrowded forests and removing dead or unhealthy plants and trees that can contribute to dangerous wildfire conditions.

"With ranching comes the responsibility of caring for the land," says Knight. "Projects like this help us improve forest health before wildfire strikes. That's





good for the ranch, good for wildlife, and good for the communities that depend on the water that comes from these forests."

Funded through the U.S. Forest Service's Community Wildfire Defense Grant program, the project includes 137 acres of forest thinning and 714 acres of mastication treatments. These efforts reduce hazardous fuels, helping lower the likelihood that a future wildfire will burn with devastating intensity.

This work is especially important given the challenges facing dry forests across the West. For decades, many dry forests have gone without the frequent, low-intensity fires that once helped keep them healthy. As a result, dry forests have become denser, with more small trees, bushes and shrubs that fuel larger, more severe wildfires. At the same time, climate change has put increased stress on forests, weakening trees and making them more vulnerable to insects, disease and severe wildfire. When severe wildfires do occur, the impacts can reach far beyond just the burn area. Plants that help stabilize soil are lost, increasing erosion and allowing ash and sediment to wash into streams and reservoirs. This can degrade water quality, severely impacting plants and animals and threatening the watersheds on which communities across the Southwest rely.

"Healthy forests are one of our first lines of defense for protecting water supplies," says Jason Scullion, forest strategy director for TNC in New Mexico. "We've seen firsthand how severe wildfires can affect both our precious rivers and streams along with water quality for communities downstream, and we know how important it is to reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire in these forests."

Scullion said that analyses conducted through the Rio Grande Water Fund identified the San Juan-Chama Project area among the highest priority places to invest in forest restoration, offering the highest return on investment among forests in the fund's footprint.

By taking action today, TNC hopes to help protect these forests, the wildlife that depend on them, and clean water supplies, for future generations.

**PHOTOS** © AJ Jones

# Caring for rivers in a drier future



**Rivers are the lifeblood of New Mexico, and this has been a difficult year for our rivers and for the people, wildlife and communities that depend on them.**

Headlines about the Colorado River Basin have dominated the news as states, Tribal Nations, farmers, cities and other water users grapple with how to share an overallocated system. Here in New Mexico, those challenges were painfully visible. More than 85 miles of the Middle Rio Grande ran dry this summer, adding to the increasingly common stretches of dry river in the Lower Rio Grande.

In the upper Cliff-Gila Valley, the channel at The Nature Conservancy's Gila River Farm was dry for months, with the river's flow diverted into irrigation ditches. Similar stories are unfolding across the state. Tributaries dried up. Pueblos faced challenges accessing clean and reliable water for cultural ceremonies. Farmers struggled to irrigate crops, and some were forced out of business. As rivers shrank to isolated pools and sandbars, the sounds of birds and wildlife grew quieter.

This is our new reality.

New Mexico's long-term outlook for water is clear. The state's Leap Ahead analysis projects that flows in New Mexico's major rivers could decline by as much as 25% over the next 50 years. In sum, we must plan for a future with less water.

With this reality in mind, across New Mexico, The Nature conservancy and our partners are proving that we can steward our rivers and manage water in ways that support people and nature, creating literal pools of life that are sustained by conservation efforts.

Along the Gila River, water is periodically redirected from irrigation ditches back to the floodplain, helping sustain a thriving wetland where beavers, willows and groundwater all play a role in storing water on the landscape.

In the Middle Rio Grande, our partners are leasing water and returning it to the river, creating critical habitat for wildlife. This summer, it was inspiring to watch a small school of endangered Rio Grande silvery minnows swimming through one of these restored pools.

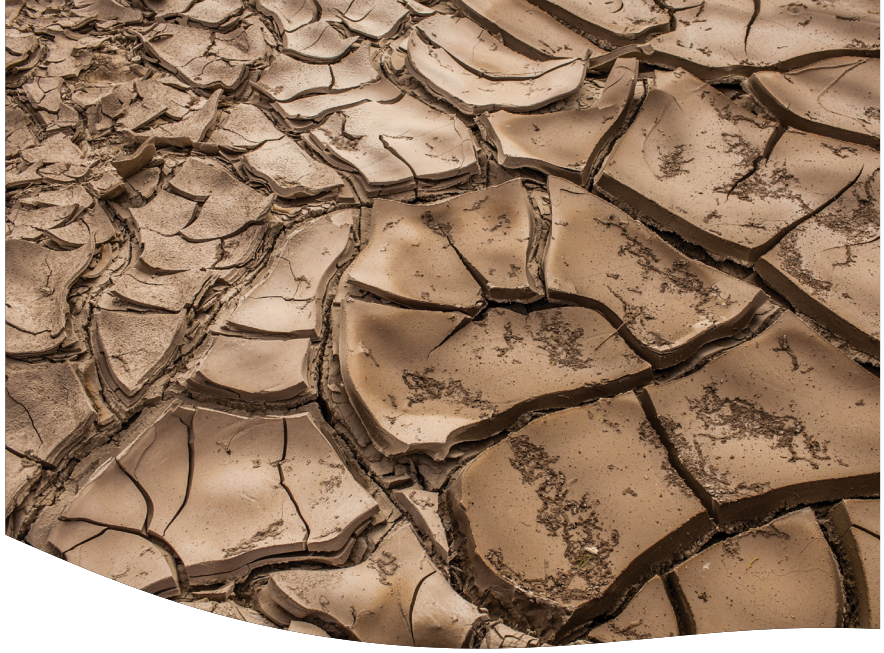
In Santa Fe, TNC's Santa Fe Canyon Preserve provided refuge for wildlife seeking water and shade, including bears. It is a reminder that while people visit conserved lands for recreation, wildlife depend on them for survival.

On the San Juan River, the Jicarilla Apache Nation Water Sharing Agreement allowed 20,000 acre-feet of water to be released from Navajo Dam this summer, helping maintain river flows, lower water temperatures, improve habitat for native fish and provide benefits to downstream water users. Across the Colorado River Basin, the agreement is recognized as an important model for collaborative water conservation.

And throughout New Mexico's rivers and headwaters, beavers continue their quiet work. By building dams and slowing water, they create wetlands, improve groundwater recharge and provide habitat for countless species. Inspired by these natural engineers, partners across the state are implementing process-based restoration projects that mimic beaver activity and help rivers retain water longer.

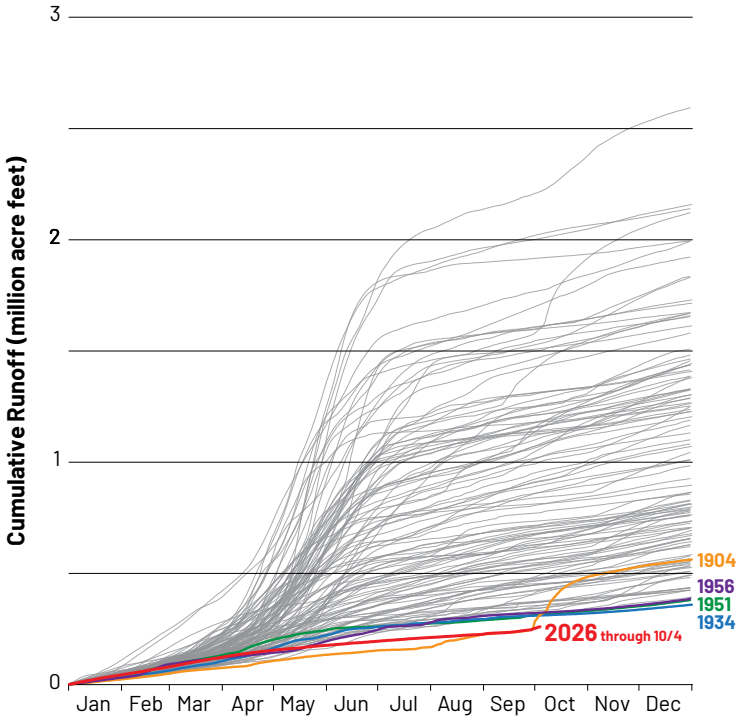
New Mexico's rivers are beloved, hardworking ecosystems. Recognizing that rivers themselves need water is essential to sustaining the landscapes, economies and communities that depend on them.

As water leader and TNC trustee Phoebe Suina often reminds us, "we are all walking bodies of water." We are quite literally made of water. When we recognize that connection, we are reminded that caring for rivers is not separate from caring for ourselves. Stewarding our rivers means stewarding the future of New Mexico.

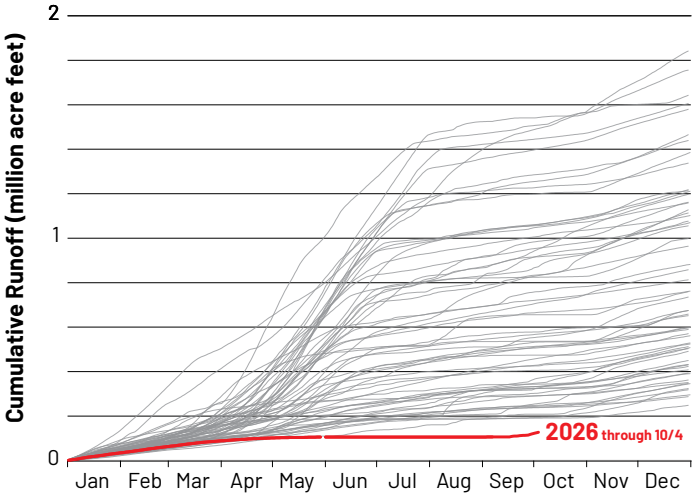




## Cumulative Flow in the Rio Grande at Otowi Bridge 1900–2026




## Cumulative Flow in the Rio Grande at Albuquerque 1966–2026




**FROM LEFT** Rio Grande River © Fauna Creative; Dried river bed near San Juan River © Erika Nortemann; Gila River © Erika Nortemann





# Finding solutions in the Colorado River Basin

The Colorado River Basin is facing a defining moment. This year's hot, dry conditions arrived in the third decade of ongoing drought, taxing water supplies and putting additional stress on nature and communities. Meeting this challenge will require policy changes and investments in the natural systems that help keep water flowing across the basin.

This year, the operating guidelines for the Colorado River Basin expire. Although the seven basin states worked to negotiate how to share water cuts, they were unable to reach a consensus. As a result, the Bureau of Reclamation put forth a new 10-year framework with operating guidelines that will be reevaluated every two years.

The new guidelines are an important step forward but will not resolve every challenge facing the basin. Smart implementation will be key to protecting natural systems, elevating Tribal leadership and removing barriers to action. TNC is focused on practical solutions that work alongside the guidelines to put the basin on a path to resilience.

"There is all this invisible infrastructure in the forests, wetlands and rivers that helps make sure we get water at the right times in the right places," says Celene Hawkins, TNC's Colorado River program director. "We're working to protect and restore that natural infrastructure, and looking at how we can be smart and thoughtful in moving water around the system so we keep it healthy."

TNC is also working with partners, Tribes and communities to develop flexible management tools like voluntary water agreements that help keep water in rivers while supporting the people who depend on it.

To expand this work, new public funding is critical. We're looking to innovative approaches TNC has deployed around the world, including project finance for permanence, water funds and watershed investment funds. These models bring together public and private partners to invest in projects that improve water management.

In a system as large and complex as the Colorado River Basin—spanning seven states, two countries and 30 Tribal Nations—meeting this challenge will require many hands working together to care for the diverse landscapes on which we all depend.

"We're figuring out how to have thriving communities in a basin that's drier," says Hawkins. "I see so many people committed to building that future together. And I'm seeing so many good ideas on the ground that we can help implement."



**FROM TOP** Gila River © Harold E. Malde; San Juan River © Rory Doyle

# A legacy rooted in nature



For Margaret Keller, caring for nature is not a pastime. It is a way of life. From planting and nurturing trees across New Mexico to supporting green infrastructure projects in her neighborhood, Margaret has devoted her time and energy to helping communities thrive alongside the natural world. As she puts it, "I truly believe that you cannot support human beings without nature being involved."

A lifelong supporter of conservation, Margaret's connection to nature began early. A native New Mexican, she spent much of her childhood exploring the landscapes she still treasures today. She speaks passionately about the importance of protecting the land, water and wildlife that make the Southwest unique and sees conservation as essential to the future of both people and nature.

That belief ultimately led Margaret to deepen her commitment to The Nature Conservancy. She was drawn to TNC's ability to make a tangible impact at the local level while advancing conservation on a broader scale. "You are protecting my land," she says, explaining why TNC's work in New Mexico resonates so strongly with her.

As she considered her legacy, Margaret decided to take an extraordinary step: donating her Albuquerque home to TNC through her estate plans. The decision felt both practical and deeply meaningful. She takes comfort in knowing that a place she loves will one day help advance conservation efforts for generations to come. "The minute I decided it, it felt really good," she shares.

Margaret's commitment to TNC now extends beyond philanthropy. She recently accepted an invitation to join TNC's New Mexico Board of Trustees, where she hopes to contribute both her time and passion to advancing conservation across the state.

For Margaret, supporting TNC is about ensuring that future generations inherit healthy lands, clean water and thriving communities. Through her leadership and legacy gift, she is helping make that future possible.

**LEARN MORE** ▸ To learn more about a gift of real estate or other ways to support The Nature Conservancy through your estate plans, contact **Sullivan Peraino, Sullivan.Peraino@tnc.org**

Photo courtesy of Margaret Keller

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Vermillion flycatcher © Gregor Hamilton



# 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 | nature.org/legacy

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