

CONSERVATION Showcase

A New Land Stewardship Collaboration Cultivated at the Old Schoolhouse

Ranchers Lead Landscape-Scale Conservation Effort, Preserve Local Traditions

The old schoolhouse in Cebolla, New Mexico was the site of a new kind of learning for a group of ranchers and an array of agency representatives this February. Together, the group set out to see how myriad state, federal and other programs can be shaped together to meet the unique conservation and community needs of this historic agricultural region.

The Hispanic families that currently live and ranch in the Cebolla and Nutrias communities of northern New Mexico have done so permanently since the late 1700's. Still today, ranching is as important as ever.

"We want our families to stay on the land and keep our ranching tradition going," said local rancher Max Martinez.

In addition to grazing livestock on their private property, local producers have contracts to graze on state and federal lands in the area. Land ownership includes the State of New Mexico, Bureau of Land Management, US Forest Service, and a number of local citizens.

The landscape here encompasses pinon-juniper-sagebrush ecosystems, alpine meadows, and aspen, conifer and ponderosa woodlands. In addition to livestock, this expansive 220,000-acre setting is home to elk, mule deer, turkey, grouse and mountain lions. The overall area is managed for agriculture, timber production, recreation and wildlife.



The area's private and public land managers are unified by common concerns about forest health, grassland management, wildlife habitat, wildfire management and water availability.

"We want to manage a large landscape a better way," said local rancher Gerald Chacon.

"Federal agencies are placing increasing emphasis on addressing these varied natural resource issues concurrently, on a landscape scale," commented US Forest Service Regional Forester Corbin Newman.

Doing this, however, is an intricate process, which becomes even more complex when the patchwork of land ownership is so varied.

"Wildlife and water don't pay attention to property lines," explains rancher Gerald Chacon. "So we need to work together."

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To foster collaboration, local ranchers formed the Cebolla Nutrias Watershed Group and invited public land managers and other government and private conservation organizations to participate. The group is working together to jointly develop and follow strategies to protect natural resources, manage for compatible livestock and wildlife use, address water supply issues, protect water quality, and preserve the agricultural way of life in the Cebolla/Nutrias area.

“We want to manage a large landscape a better way,” said Mr. Chacon. “We feel this group can help agencies and ranchers get farther faster.”

Partners participating in the effort and attending the recent meeting include: the Northern Rio Grande Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D) Council, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, US Forest Service, New Mexico State Forestry Division, USDA Farm Services Agency, New Mexico Department of Game and Fish, Extension Service, Bureau of Land Management, Bureau of Reclamation, New Mexico State Land Office, USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service, and USDA Rural Development.

“When agencies deliver programs, we need to get the idea from the community first, then match a program with it,” said Rural Development State Director Terry Brunner.

In addition to these agencies, the Cebolla Nutrias Watershed Group is also working with environmental groups that have an interest in protecting natural areas and wildlife habitat in the region.

“Local leadership is essential to providing lasting conservation benefits,” said NRCS Assistant State Conservationist Norman Vigil. “These ranchers are making sure the process is collaborative and effective.”

With coordination and facilitation from the Northern Rio Grande RC&D Council, a local non-profit devoted to natural resource protection and community development, the Cebolla Nutrias Watershed Group is moving forward with the study and planning of a comprehensive and collaborative landscape-scale conservation effort.