

Rio Grande Agricultural Land Trust

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Summer 2022

Celebrating 25 Years of Conservation

It was 25 years ago, a diverse group of community members – farmers and conservationists - gathered at my kitchen table to discuss ways to protect farmland in Socorro County. The county was contemplating the establishment of a county zoning ordinance, potentially classifying agricultural land in ways that would limit landowner's options, impacting private property rights. This initiated an in-depth discussion between the founding members of the organization about government imposing restrictions on private land. We wanted alternate and voluntary options to protect agricultural land and water, both of which are highly valued by Socorro County's citizens. We learned about land trusts and conservation easements (CEs), a tool for protecting farmland and natural habitat forever. Through the support of land trust organizations around the country, RGALT received federal approval as a non-profit land trust in 1997 with a focus area that includes Sandoval, Bernalillo, Valencia, and Socorro Counties. Since then, RGALT has established itself as the middle Rio Grande land trust whose sole purpose is to facilitate landowners' abilities to control the protection of their agricultural and natural habitat lands through their own initiative.

For the first decade RGALT's deeply committed volunteer board members focused on setting the groundwork for private land conservation. It was clear from the beginning that the only way to achieve landscape conservation was to build relationships and trust with landowners and in the communities and to establish partnerships with agencies, tribes, and other non-profits. Over the decades RGALT has achieved bringing diverse and unlikely groups together to protect the lands we all cherish for widely diverse reasons.

In 2004, RGALT finalized their first easement protecting farmland adjacent to Casa Colorado Refuge in Valencia County. By our 20th anniversary in 2017, RGALT had one staff, held 25 easements with several underway and received Land Trust Alliance Accreditation, an award given to land trusts meeting the highest national standards for excellence and conservation permanence. Fast forward, today, our 25th anniversary, RGALT has achieved accreditation renewal, employs 2.5 staff, and holds 29 easements, with funding secured for 6 additional CEs

now underway, and 3 more CEs being developed.

Accomplishing CEs is especially challenging in the MRG where the majority of agricultural landowners are socially disadvantaged and underserved. Supporting landowners' conservation needs requires RGALT to seek conservation funding for these landowners, for both bargain sale purchase of CEs and to find ways to cover the CE transaction costs. Local, state and federal conservation funding is limited or non-existent to protect these high value lands, under extreme development pressure – lands that not only provide food but are critical wildlife corridors. Yet with limited funding sources, RGALT has been

able to secure funding for 90% of our CEs that without funding would not have happened. Providing landowners with conservation funding provides landowners, especially land rich, cash poor, an opportunity to realize part of the land asset and offers an alternative to selling their land and water rights.

Conservation success is often measured in numbers - number of easements, number of acres protected. RGALT's success can be measured by our efforts to ensure equitable conservation for



Photo by Paul Tashjian, RGALT Board Member/Audubon SW

all landowners, not just for those wealthy enough to receive tax benefits - often newcomers. We work to serve the historic landowners, many who have inherited their family lands and whose families have been stewarding them for multiple generations. These landowners have a heart connection to the land and strong desire to see it remain in agriculture and to protect the historic water rights. They want to pass their land legacy on to their heirs but they cannot afford the CE transaction costs much less to donate a CE. Our success can be measured by the partnerships we have established over the years, more than a hundred partnerships. In the last decade RGALT alone, and with partners has been awarded \$14.5 M in federal and state conservation dollars, with half of the funding for CEs and the remainder for restoration –this has resulted in more than 15,000 acres of threatened natural habitat, farmland, and wildlife corridors protected and/or restored.

The MRG landscape is under dire threat due to growing urban and rural development, drought, water management shifts, water policies,

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and climate change. These are serious concerns identified by diverse communities, agricultural producers, environmentalists, historic tribal and Hispanic communities, acequia associations, water managers, migratory bird conservationists, wildlife managers, policy-makers, and outdoor enthusiasts. Underserved land-owners are more vulnerable to these pressures because land conservation is not economically feasible.

Due to these threats, numerous conservation organizations have designated the MRG as a priority conservation focus area for protecting and restoring land. RGALT is developing new and expanding existing partnerships to address this issue in a more coordinated and effective manner. RGALT is a key partner in the landscape conservation effort, given our 25 years of establishing relationships and trust with landowners and our success in building bridges between landowners and conservation agencies – the key to conservation success.

As RGALT's director, I have experienced our conservation work to be far beyond a real estate transaction. We embark on a journey with each landowner on what is often a highly emotional transaction. Each one of our projects has a unique story and history behind it, stories that bind us like family. Each landowner's project is a demonstration of their commitment and love for the land, family and their cultural heritage – and their desire to leave a legacy benefitting all of us - today and in the future.



"We've never wavered on the vision that our dad had - it was always about family and it was about the tierra. We share RGALT's vision. It's about having this common vision because once it's gone, you never get it back. People have to decide what's important, what do you want to leave behind. Once you give it up, it never comes back."

– Mark Garcia, RGALT CE landowner



Watch for RGALT's upcoming 25th anniversary video that includes interviews with Mark and Ray Garcia, two brothers who are protecting their family lands in Tome and Casa Colorada, Valencia County, NM.

RGALT's 25th Anniversary Celebration and Fundraiser

Join us in celebrating the Rio Grande Agricultural Land Trust's 25th Anniversary at our Annual Fall Harvest Fundraiser event! In celebrating 25 years serving the Middle Rio Grande communities' conservation needs, we also celebrate the incredible network of partners and supporters like you who play an integral role in RGALT's ability to protect land and water, forever.

Our celebration will be held at Glen Duggins's Cinco Estrella Chile Farm in Lemitar, on November 5, 3-8pm! We are excited to bring the community together to celebrate and experience the land that feeds us. The young, old, and in between are invited for a good ol' country barn dance, farm tour hay ride, horse and pony rides and a feast of traditional New Mexican foods.



CELEBRATING
25
YEARS



At this year's event, we will premiere RGALT's 25th Anniversary Commemorative Video to be used as an outreach tool, shared with landowners, partners, funders, and the MRG communities! The video will showcase RGALT's conservation easement landowners' stories and our conservation work in the MRG. **You can help support the video production by award winning Christi Bode, Moxi-Cran Productions.** Your name will be listed in the video credits.

Together, we can protect New Mexico's farms, ranches, and natural habitat for the benefit of all New Mexicans.

Please contact us if you would like to become an event sponsor and/or support our video production (\$10,000) or visit our website, www.rgalt.org

RGALT is a 501c3 organization, all contributions are tax deductible.

NEW RGALT Staff and Board Members



Welcome Elena Taylor, RGALT's Conservation Coordinator

Elena is drawn to RGALT's work through her love of the Rio Grande and desire to protect the surrounding farmland for generations to come. Working with RGALT provides an opportunity to build on the conservation work accomplished by her father, the late John Taylor, USFWS Bosque del Apache NWR biologist and one of RGALT's founding members. As RGALT's Conservation Coordinator, Elena is looking forward to working with the many landowners, stakeholders and partners to protect the land and cultural heritage we all cherish.



NANCY RANNEY has over 20 years of ranch management experience, is on the board of the Southwest Grass-fed Livestock Alliance (SWGLA) and the Quivira Coalition. She is also a member of the New Mexico Cattle Growers and the Society for Range Management.



TERRY MULERT is the UNM Presidential Scholarship Program Director for The University of NM Foundation Inc. His professional career includes 20 years teaching in higher education, he has raised almost \$10 million in small to major gifts from mostly private donors over a 12-year span.



THOMAS SWENDSON, spent 5 years running the MoGro project (working in rural food access) prior to taking over ownership of Beneficial Farms CSA and is now the owner of New Mexico Harvest which supports over 90 NM food producers across the state.

Leaving A Meaningful Legacy

Tucked down a quiet private road, sits a serene half acre alongside the Los Duranes acequia. This parcel, once part of a large farm along the Rio Grande, was the home of Meinrad Craighead, an artist and former contemplative nun. It was here, Meinrad created much of her spiritual art that became well known and widely sought after. And it was here and across Europe and the United States that she began lecturing and conducting workshops and retreats on the divine feminine, launching "Praying with Images: Creative Retreats for Women". It was here at her home nestled under the cottonwood trees that she shared a space for connecting with the divine sanctity of nature.

I met Meinrad Craighead for the first time, more than 15 years ago. At that time she expressed grave concern that upon her passing, her special place would be sold and "one of those ridiculous giant houses would fill the entire space". She was firmly committed to preserving the quiet setting and serene nature of her piece of peace - located less than half a mile from the Rio Grande Valley State Park, Paseo del Bosque Multi-use Trail, Rio Grande Nature Center, and the Candelaria Nature Preserve. It was through our visits that Meinrad made the decision to entrust RGALT with preserving her property by naming RGALT as the recipient of her generous bequest. Her



vision for her cherished place was to protect the open space as a sanctuary garden for wildlife and people - a setting that would provide sustenance for the body and spirit and a place to connect with nature and the cultural history of the historic farm property and the community.

Upon Meinrad's passing, RGALT received the property and honored her wishes to protect the peaceful character of the place. And as was mutually agreed, RGALT sold the conserved property, seeking buyers who would honor and respect her vision.

"What a place! Although it's only a tiny piece of bosque, its archaeology is remarkable. Ms. Craighead's art and words tap into a deep, primal energy rooted in the land. We think the studio retains that energy. Giving form to these powerful narratives while projecting into the future is an amazing opening."

The funds generated from the sale have

allowed RGALT to hire new staff and expand our conservation work. With more boots on the ground, we are able to protect more land and water, build new partnerships, bring more conservation funding to NM and better serve the conservation needs of both people and wildlife in the middle Rio Grande. Meinrad Craighead has not only left her land legacy behind, her gift allows RGALT to help others preserve their land and leave legacies behind that benefit all of us.

An estate gift is a way to have a huge impact on RGALT's conservation efforts. And most of all it is a way to leave a meaningful legacy behind - protecting the places you cherish for future generations.

To learn more about options to give, please visit rgalt.org or call 505-270-4421.





Photo by Paul Tashjian, RGALT Board Member

MRGCD Water Update

by Casey Ish

The Middle Rio Grande Conservancy District (MRGCD) is committed to working with our farmers and regional partners such as Rio Grande Agricultural Land Trust (RGALT) to find near-term and long-term solutions to water and land management challenges in pursuit of sustainable agriculture in the middle valley. One way in which the MRGCD is working to balance competing demand for water in 2022 is by offering enrollment in the Environmental Water Leasing Program (Program) to support farmers, and endangered species in what is shaping up to be a tough water year for both. This program is intended to financially compensate farmers who voluntarily fallow agricultural land for the duration of the irrigation season. Importantly, this program is not a silver bullet for water management in the middle

valley, nor is it an attempt to permanently fallow (also known as “buy and dry”) farmland. The Program is simply a lever that can be pulled by MRGCD to alter total irrigation demand in water short years while still allowing participating farmers to realize some income on fallowed fields.

By temporarily reducing irrigated acreage in the valley, MRGCD can use that conserved water to help support strategic habitat sites for endangered species and potentially reduce the State of New Mexico’s debit to the Rio Grande Compact. Both actions provide benefits for farmers. MRGCD is reducing the risk of incurring additional water use and storage restrictions on our farmers by helping to lower New Mexico’s Rio Grande Compact debit which has grown to 127,100 acre-feet as of the last official accounting at the beginning of 2022. By delivering small quantities of Program water to strategic outfalls in the Isleta Reach of the river MRGCD maintains our commitments to the 2016 Biological Opinion. To this effect, the MRGCD enrolled 2,554 acres in the Program with participation from 190 irrigators in 2022, compared to 721 acres with 44 participants in 2021.

As of June 18th, the monsoon pattern has started to make an impact and the middle valley has seen meaningful moisture which will prop up diversions, crops, river conditions, and compact deliveries temporarily. It must be stressed however, that the state of our water supply is still tenuous. Without the ability to store water in El Vado due to dam safety work and compact restrictions MRGCD is heavily reliant upon monsoon precipitation to carry many of our farmers through to harvest.

Water management in the middle valley is a balancing act, requiring MRGCD and other entities to work collaboratively to support competing demands for our most precious resource. These short-term collective efforts are impactful and translate into long-term partnerships that ultimately move the needle towards sustainable agriculture in the middle valley. MRGCD is appreciative of the partnership that we have developed with the RGALT and looks forward to collaborating on projects that promote, and conserve sustainable agriculture for years to come.

MRG Farmland Under Threat

RGALT’s conservation focus area is the middle Rio Grande, the most populated area of NM, including Albuquerque, NM’s largest metropolitan area. The MRG landscape is under dire threat due to increasing urbanization, loss of agricultural water rights to municipal and industrial uses and years of extreme drought. Predictions for climate change make it essential to preserve and restore the private land for the local foodshed and the MRG’s natural habitat - both critical for sustaining people and wildlife. Farmland protection is of utmost importance for a local food system, providing wildlife habitat and linkages between the five wildlife refuges scattered through the MRG corridor, for preserving the cultural heritage of the MRG communities and ensuring ecosystem resiliency.

The American Farmland Trust’s multi-year initiative “Farms Under Threat” documents that between 2001-2016 NM lost 53,300 acres of agricultural land to urban and highly developed (UHD) land use, and 59,700 acres of agricultural land to low-density residential (LDR) land use.

The USDA agricultural census showed the following declines in agricultural acres between 2012-2017.

- Bernalillo County - 36% decline - 221,495 acres
- Socorro County - 28% decline - 912,476 acres
- Valencia County - 23% decline - 517,702 acres
- Sandoval County - 18% decline - 783,724 acres



With NM’s recent real estate market boom, we expect the decline between 2017-2022 to show similar trends. Yet, compared to other states, New Mexico scored among the lowest states for policies and programs that protect agricultural land from development, promote farm viability, and facilitate the transfer of agricultural land. **Currently, there are NO state conservation programs funded** nor has there been any funding since former Governor Richardson’s administration. And our federal partner, NM NRCS brings only \$250,000-\$750,000 for their Agriculture Land Easement Program to NM, meanwhile neighboring states’ NRCS offices fund the program at \$14M- \$19M. It is imperative RGALT and our conservation partners ensure the state and the nation’s “30x30 Initiative” (to protect 30% of the nation’s land by 2030) results in funding for private land protection in NM.

Your voice is needed to speak out to policy makers and agencies about the need for conservation funding to protect NM’s land and water.

Thank You RGALT 2021 Supporters!

RGALT relies on donations from the community to continue to protect land and waters in the MRG. We can't do this work without you, and we are truly grateful for your contributions each year.

\$5,000+

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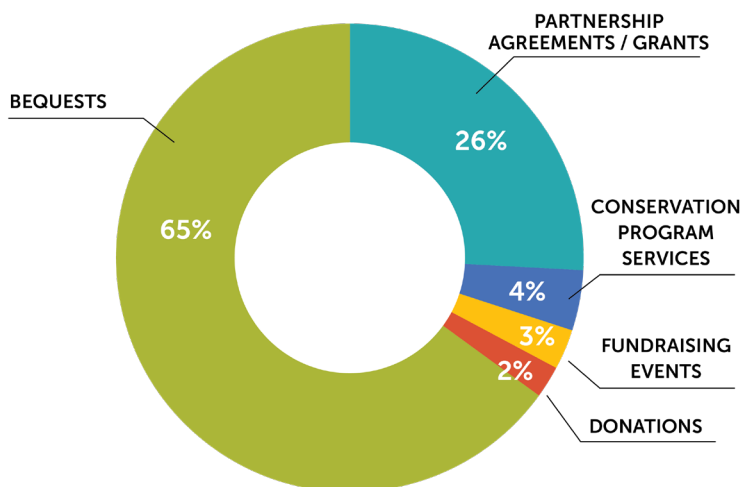
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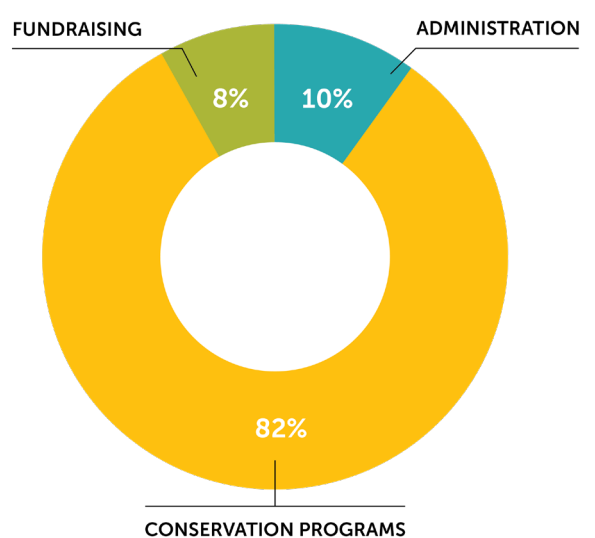
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2021 FISCAL REPORT

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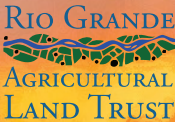
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25TH ANNIVERSARY
Celebration and Annual Fundraiser

Premiering **RGALT's 25th Anniversary Commemorative Video**



Saturday, November 5th ★ 3-8 PM
CINCO ESTRELLA CHILE FARM  LEMITAR, NEW MEXICO

Live Music by the High Desert Playboys, Farm Tour, Hayrides, Pony Rides, Traditional New Mexican Food, and a Lively Auction!

Your support makes you an important partner in our conservation work. Our suggested sponsorship levels for this year's fundraising events are below:

FARMALL - \$500 2 tickets and your name on our ticket website.	MINNEAPOLIS-MOLINE - \$2500 8 tickets and your name / logo on our website and social media post.
MASSEY FERGUSON - \$1000 4 tickets and your name on our ticket website.	JOHN DEERE - \$5000 or more! 10 tickets plus your name or logo on our event flyer, event mailer, website, and included in RGALT social media outreach!