



New Mexico 2023 Annual Report





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NRCS New Mexico 2023 Annual Report

For NRCS New Mexico, Fiscal Year 2023 was a banner year unlike any seen before. NRCS continued to serve a critical role in the recovery process for those communities devastated by the 2022 Hermit's Peak/Calf Canyon wildfire and flooding, the largest natural disaster in New Mexico's history. Additionally, NRCS NM, like the rest of NRCS across the nation, also saw the first wave of funding under the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) for climate-smart practices. This was a massive and historic infusion of funding Secretary Vilsack described as a "once-in-a-generation investment," in conservation. This opportunity by itself represents a significant obligation. Add to that 10 other disasters across the state in 2022 resulting in Emergency Watershed Protection Program (EWP) events and then all the ongoing typical workload NRCS handles each year through our programs and partnerships and you can see how calling FY 2023 a busy year would be an understatement!

And yet, we did it. We created, developed, and implemented a program from the ground up that facilitated the delivery of hundreds of millions of dollars to families and landowners affected by wildfires. We stabilized watersheds and protected homes and structures across large swaths of land. We diverted a huge number of employees, time, and resources to help our fellow New Mexicans in need and still maintained our commitments to our partners and producers across the state. For months, we had teams tirelessly working overtime seven days a week.

I'm proud to say we still made time to connect with the employees in our own agency, holding an all-employee operational workshop, and bringing together all NRCS NM employees in one place for the first time in over a decade.

Almost 90 years ago, our agency was founded to address the ecological disaster of the Dust Bowl and help America

recover from that national threat. Today, as some have called climate change our new Dust Bowl, we are called on to do it again. NRCS is the tip of the spear in this effort, and, if frequent natural disasters are the new normal, New Mexico has been on the front lines. NRCS NM has answered the call and in New Mexico, our agency's legacy of serving the people and the land endures and thrives, stronger than ever.

We are honored to serve the agricultural producers of New Mexico and are privileged to have earned their trust and confidence as we continue helping people help the land. Thank you to the NRCS NM team and all our partners who continuously work to create a better New Mexico.



J. Xavier Montoya
State Conservationist



2023 Leadership Team



ADRIAN TAFOYA
South Area Conservationist



ELIAS GNANN
State Conservation Engineer



KRIS GRAHAM CHAVEZ
Assistant State Conservationist for
Field Development



ALICIA RODRIGUEZ
Assistant State Conservationist for
Partnerships



JASON MARTIN
North Area Conservationist



RICK STRAIT
State Soil Scientist



KENNETH BRANCH
Assistant State Conservationist for
Programs



ART ARIAN
State Resource Conservationist



ROSABETH GARCIA-SAIS
Assistant State Conservationist for
Management & Strategy



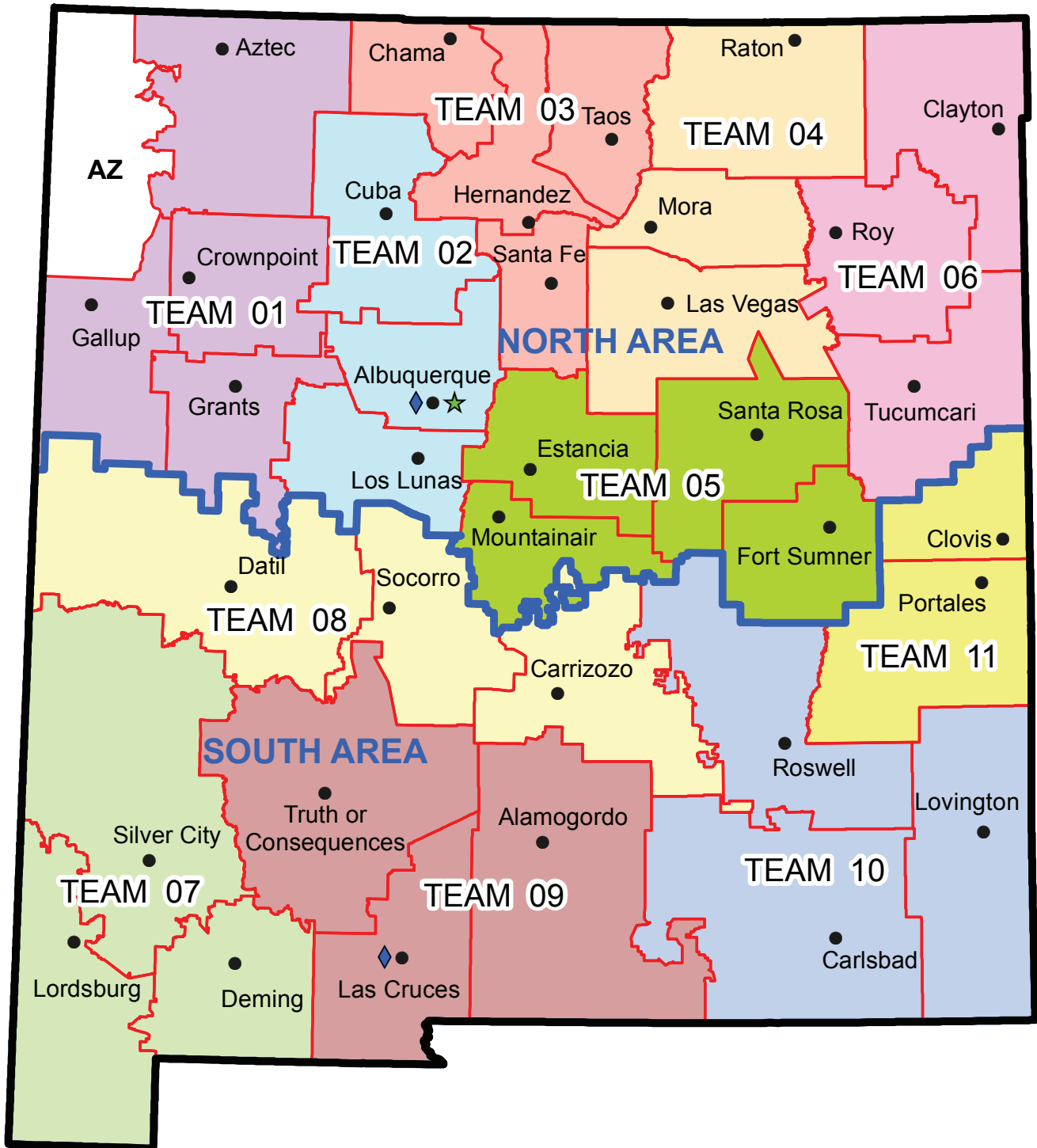
LEONARD LUNA
Public Affairs Specialist



CHRISHELLE JACKSON
Executive Assistant to the State
Conservationist



NRCS - New Mexico Administrative Areas and Service Centers



Management & Strategy

Rosabeth Garcia-Sais

Assistant State Conservationist for Management & Strategy

The NRCS New Mexico Management & Strategy (M&S) Team contributed to the overall success of NRCS NM by providing operational leadership and support for the field as well as oversight and quality assurance in our business processes.

M&S helped get conservation on the ground by effectively managing a technical assistance budget of over \$52 million used to support our workforce. M&S posted 129 job opportunity announcements, resulting in 80 selections, ending the year with 151 employees on board, a 14% increase from 2022! M&S updated the furniture in several offices to provide a more efficient use of the space and

ensured employees had the tools and equipment needed to perform their duties. Formal retirement training was provided to new employees, ensuring that all employees in New Mexico have the information needed to make sound decisions now that will affect their career and retirement in the future. In addition, pre-retirement health benefits training was provided to interested FPAC employees statewide.

As in previous years, grants and agreements played a major role in our conservation efforts. M&S successfully entered into 10 new agreements, completed 32 amendments to existing agreements, and closed out 14 agreements.



NRCS New Mexico Management & Strategy Team

AGREEMENTS

10 NEW

32 AMMENDED

14 CLOSED OUT

129 JOB
ANNOUNCEMENTS

80 SELECTIONS

151 EMPLOYEES
**(14% INCREASE FROM
2022)**

\$52
MILLION
TECHNICAL
ASSISTANCE
BUDGET

**(93% INCREASE
FROM 2022)**

Programs

Kenneth Branch

Assistant State Conservationist for Programs

Resilience has been the buzzword across the country as the impacts of COVID-19, climate change, and supply chain limitations have affected the health and profitability of farmers and ranchers. NRCS took action in 2023 to unprecedented inflation by encouraging flexibility with rescheduling, substituting, and deleting contract items that became too expensive for participants to implement. NRCS also provided supplementary payments for limited

practices that were most affected by higher commodity prices. NRCS staff responded to fires and floods across the state with resiliency, flexibility, and empathy while working on the Emergency Watershed Protection Program (EWP), Emergency Conservation Program (ECP), and Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) to protect property and restore land affected by these disasters. NRCS continues to identify and remove barriers to participation for historically underserved producers and urban farmers because increasing the diversity of farmers and the diversity of crops improves the resilience of our communities.

NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION SERVICE, USDA — FINANCIAL AND TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE, NEW MEXICO FY 2023

PROGRAM	FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE						
	Allocation (\$)	Obligations				Funded Applications (#)	Unfunded Applications (#)
		\$	%	Underserved (%)	Acres (#)		
CSP Inflation Reduction Act	\$5,673,440	\$5,673,440	100.0%	89.4%	226,600.1	6	4
EQIP Inflation Reduction Act	\$4,801,276	\$4,801,276	100.0%	63.9%	33,492.1	61	8
Inflation Reduction Act Total	\$10,474,716	\$10,474,716	100.0%	N/A	260,092.2	67	13
ACEP Farm Bill	\$1,380,908	\$1,380,908	100.0%	0.0%	2,228.0	1	1
CSP Farm Bill	\$22,294,499	\$22,294,499	100.0%	66.8%	1,348,293.7	73	67
EQIP Farm Bill	\$28,373,565	\$27,307,953	96.2%	52.6%	479,875.0	291	526
Farm Bill Total	\$52,048,972	\$50,983,360	98.0%	N/A	1,830,396.7	365	594
Grand Total	\$62,523,688	\$61,458,075	98.3%	N/A	2,090,488.9	432	607



TOP 5 EQIP CONSERVATION PRACTICES IN NEW MEXICO FY 2023

INFLATION REDUCTION ACT	FARM BILL
1. Forest Stand Improvement	1. Sprinkler System
2. Sprinkler System	2. Brush Management
3. Cover Crop	3. Irrigation Pipeline
4. Pasture and Hay Planting	4. Fence
5. Irrigation Pipeline	5. Forest Stand Improvement

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)

New Contracts.....	332
Acres.....	893,969
Dollars.....	\$27,100,000
Contracts with Beginning Farmers/Ranchers	93
Contracts with Limited Resource Farmers/Ranchers.....	19
Contracts with Socially Disadvantaged Farmers/Ranchers	119

Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)

Contracts Funded for Classic and Renewal sign-ups	74
Contracts Funded for Classic-IRA.....	6
Contracts Funded for Grassland Conservation Initiative	6
Acres Funded in FY 2023	1,574,893
Contracts with Beginning Farmers/Ranchers	14
Contracts with Socially Disadvantaged Farmers/Ranchers	19
Dollars obligated in 2023 for all 5 years	\$28,021,719
Unfunded applications	114

NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION SERVICE, USDA — NEW MEXICO OBLIGATIONS BY CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT FY 2023

	CSP IRA	EQIP IRA	CSP FARM BILL	EQIP FARM BILL
District 1	\$	\$369,956	\$4,440,101	\$4,074,705
District 2	\$2,545,118	\$910,211	\$13,420,226	\$5,559,759
District 3	\$3,128,322	\$3,518,806	\$4,498,886	\$13,364,043
Grand Total	\$ 5,673,440	\$ 4,798,973	\$ 22,359,213	\$ 22,998,507



NRCS Resource Conservationist checking on new cottonwood and willow poles at an easement near Socorro, New Mexico.



Four properties with easements were showcased in the NRCS *Conservation at Work* video series.

Emergency Watershed Program (EWP)

ACTIVE	
EVENT NAME	SPONSOR
Hondo Valley	Lincoln County
Black Fire	Sierra Soil and Water Conservation District
Hermit's Peak/Calf Canyon Fire (Ariel Seeding/Mulching)	Tierra Y Montes Soil and Water Conservation District, Western Mora Soil and Water Conservation District
Hermit's Peak/Calf Canyon Fire Phase II	Tierra Y Montes Soil and Water Conservation District, Western Mora Soil and Water Conservation District
Cooks Peak	Sandoval County
McBride Fire and Windstorm	Lincoln County
Corn Ranch	Chaves County Flood Commission
Gila and Mimbres Flood	Grant Count
Hidalgo Flooding	Hidalgo County

COMPLETED	
EVENT NAME	SPONSOR
Apache Creek	San Francisco Soil and Water Conservation District
Nogal Fire and Windstorm	Hondo Soil and Water Conservation District



EcoServants, a local non-profit organization made up of high school and college students assist NRCS in laying out wattles.



Early results from aerial seeding on burned land.

Field Development

Kris Graham Chavez

Assistant State Conservationist for Field Development

The Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) promotes coordination of NRCS conservation activities with partners that offer value-added contributions to expand our collective ability to address on-farm, watershed, and regional natural resource concerns. Through RCPP, NRCS seeks to co-invest with partners to implement projects that demonstrate innovative solutions to conservation challenges and provide measurable improvements and outcomes tied to the resource concerns they seek to address.

New Mexico has been fortunate with 8 active agreements and is currently working on the development of one new agreement and one renewal. Some objectives include working with acequias, forest stand improvement to reduce fire risk, phreatophyte removal, and working with producers who have federal land permits.

To get started, partners apply to NRCS for RCPP project

PARTNER	RCPP #	PROGRAM
Chama * No Cost Extension Granted	1542	2017-RCPP
Acequia * No Cost Extension Granted	1614	2017-RCPP
NFWF * No Cost Extension Granted	1700	2018-RCPP

PROJECT TITLE	LEAD PARTNER	FUNDING AMOUNT
San Juan Non-Native Phreatophyte Removal Program	San Juan SWCD	\$1,042,208
Eastern New Mexico Prairie Grassland Initiative	NMACD	\$2,025,974
2015 NM Restoration Initiative for Rangeland, Forestland, and Wildlife on Ranches with Federal Lands	NMACD	\$4,000,000
2015 North Central NM Watershed Restoration Project	Claunch -Pinto SWCD	\$2,313,359
New Mexico Ogallala Preservation & Conservation	NMACD	\$6,911,311 (Easements) \$2,184,900 (Land MGMT)
Establishment of Grasslands Strongholds across the Southern High Plains	NMLC	\$9,158,500
North Central NM Watershed Restoration Project	Claunch -Pinto SWCD	\$717,413
Grazing Management and Non-Lethal Predator Risk Mitigation in NM and AZ	Western Landowners Alliance	\$6,665,854

awards. Once projects are selected, NRCS works with partners to set aside a certain pool of funding for an awarded project. Producers, landowners, and partners then enter into producer contracts and supplemental agreements with NRCS to carry out agreed-to conservation activities.

NRCS NM is working with New Mexico State University on estimating the benefits and costs of alternative conservation practices and evaluating NRCS payment schedules. The five-year project focuses on two core areas: (1) identifying a systematic approach to estimating the strengths/benefits and weaknesses/costs of alternative conservation practices, including those associated with improved soil health; and (2) evaluation of NRCS payment schedules. Efforts made in each of the areas will include applied research, education, and academic training. In addition, students working on the projects along with their faculty advisors will be available to assist NRCS NM staff in conducting economic analyses related to watershed projects as resources are available.

Partnerships

Alicia Rodriguez

Assistant State Conservationist for Partnerships

NRCS New Mexico's sustained achievements in delivering conservation services and programs are largely attributed to our strong working relationships with many key partners, such as the New Mexico Association of Conservation Districts, all local Soil and Water Conservation Districts, New Mexico Department of Agriculture, local, state and federal government, acequia associations, elected and appointed officials, and especially our farmers, ranchers, Tribes, Pueblos, and others who manage the land.

OUTREACH AGREEMENTS

New Mexico Association of Conservation Districts. To expand education, coordination, communication, and opportunities to promote public awareness of conservation, provide professional development opportunities for employees, and further the development and delivery of educational programs to increase the understanding of agriculture's role in the conservation of New Mexico's natural resources.

- Federal Funds \$850,000 (5 years)
- Performance End Date: 06/30/2024

New Mexico Conservation and Outreach Grants. To partner with and support the efforts of natural resource conservation partners, and to promote public awareness and implementation of conservation activities.

Playa Lakes Joint Venture

- Federal Funds \$27,452 (1 year)
- Performance End Date: 06/30/2024

Not Forgotten Outreach, Inc.

- Federal Funds \$20,000 (1 year)
- Performance End Date: 06/30/2024

Luna Community College: Post-Fire Workshops for Mora and San Miguel counties. To implement a Forest and Restoration Training program that will provide the local community with the skills they need to restore the land they know and love.

- Federal Funds \$54,575 (1 year)
- Performance End Date: 07/30/2024

Sand County Foundation: NM Leopold Conservation Award. To recognize outstanding land stewardship on working lands in New Mexico through the Leopold

Conservation Award program.

- Federal Funds \$32,500 (5 years)
- Total Non-Federal Funds \$50,000 (5 years)
- Performance end date: 05/31/2027

USDA's People's Garden Initiative. To support USDA's interest in urban agriculture and the People's Garden Initiative.

- Federal Funds \$26,900 (1 year)
- Performance End Date: 05/31/2024

New Mexico Agriculture in the Classroom (NMAITC) - NM Grow Project Grants. To raise awareness of NRCS and the local soil and water conservation districts to communities, parents, and students by helping to provide classrooms with complete kits for a 4X8 raised garden bed with drip irrigation and hydroponic systems. Teachers receive specialized on-site and virtual training along with continual support throughout the school year on the use of materials and ways to incorporate the projects into their curriculum.

- Federal Funds \$385,000 (5 years)
- Performance End Date: 07/31/2028

Congratulations to these twelve schools receiving a 2023-2024 NM Grow Project Grant:

1. Dream Dine Charter School, Shiprock
2. Central Primary, Bloomfield
3. Van Buren Middle School, Albuquerque
4. Albuquerque Institute of Science & Mathematics, Albuquerque,
5. Grants High School, Grants
6. Santo Niño Regional Catholic School, Santa Fe
7. Longfellow Elementary, Raton
8. West Las Vegas High School, Las Vegas
9. Sixth Street Elementary, Silver City
10. Tularosa Middle School, Tularosa
11. Nancy Lopez Elementary, Roswell
12. Cloudcroft High School, Cloudcroft



Civil Rights Advisory Committee

New Mexico's culture and tradition make it one of the world's most diverse places. The Civil Rights Advisory Committee takes our responsibility of being fair, transparent, honest, and accountable very seriously. The CRAC's charter is designed to assure that we follow federal laws, civil rights policies, and national and state objectives in addition to advising the State Conservationist on all Equal Opportunity Employment (EEO) and program delivery related matters. The CRAC promotes education, awareness, and outreach of all the Special Emphasis Programs.

Numerous recruitment and outreach events took place throughout the state by CRAC members who leveraged their partnerships to promote and inform students and potential candidates about the many job opportunities throughout the year.

Civil Rights Employee(s) of the Year

Every Fiscal Year, New Mexico recognizes an employee or group who has contributed to and advanced the purpose and principles of the civil rights program.

The New Mexico Civil Rights Employee(s) of the year for Fiscal Year 2023 was Team 2 (Albuquerque, Los Lunas, and Cuba field offices). Team 2 went above and beyond in the areas of outreach, improvement of services in programs

for socially disadvantaged and historically underserved, and employment, and civil rights discussions.

Team 2 completed over 25 outreach events in FY 2023. Many of these events were focused on socially disadvantaged and historically underserved producers.

Team 2 focused on providing outreach to many of the Pueblos in their area which resulted in more applications last year and this year. Some examples of Pueblo outreach completed by Team 2 include: presenting and tabling at the SW Intertribal Agriculture Council regional summit, attending the Climate Smart Indigenous Ag Project in Santa Ana Pueblo, tabling at Pueblo of Isleta events, and hosting a USDA programs meeting at the Santo Domingo Pueblo.

Another focus of Team 2 was outreach at schools. Team 2 attended agriculture days at schools and spoke to many young people at the county fairs. Team 2's goal was to get youth interested in conservation and agriculture.

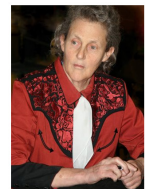
Team 2 meetings regularly feature civil rights topics that staff members volunteer to present on. These aren't normal token topics just to check a box on their agendas but are interesting topics that Team 2 often learns and grows from.

Diversity Day Presentations given by NRCS NM Special Emphasis Program Managers (SEPMS) - Sponsored by the CRAC

1. American Indian / Alaska Native Emphasis Program, Vernon Mirabal
2. Asian American and Native Hawaiian / Pacific Islander Emphasis Program, Fawna Lee-Silver
3. Black Emphasis Program, Kellie Johnson
4. Disabilities Emphasis Program, Amalia Montoya
5. Veteran's Emphasis Program, Amalia Montoya
6. Federal Women's Program, Mariah Bates
7. Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex (+) Emphasis Program, Kerri Mich
8. Hispanic Emphasis Program, Joshua Archuleta



NM CRAC Members after a meeting.



DR. MARY
TEMPLE
GRANDIN

A slide from one of the Diversity Day Presentations.

Engineering

Elias Gnann

State Conservation Engineer

NRCS New Mexico Engineering hit the ground running in 2023 after hiring a new State Conservation Engineer. The NRCS NM State Office Engineering Section reviewed and checked field office designs; provided design and policy guidance to field offices; completed on-farm designs, design checks, and certifications; and continued work on Water Management Entity (WME) site visits, surveys, and designs.

The State Office also continued work with Emergency Watershed Protection Program (EWP). NM saw both the largest and second largest wildfires in the state's history in 2022 along with many smaller events across the state. EWP work accounted for most of the workload in the State Office Engineering Section in 2023. State Office Engineers completed hundreds of site assessments, design sketches, design packages, construction inspections, and site checkouts. Work began on assessing and designing cleanout and structure repair for many Acequias across the state as well. Over a hundred million dollars of aid has been implemented across the state through EWP, including engineering design work in 2023 to implement those practices done by NRCS NM staff.

With most of the State Office Engineering capacity devoted to EWP, the Area Engineers did an excellent job of continuing to provide technical assistance for farm bill programs across the state. Both areas completed many



NRCS NM Engineers on site in front of Flood Barrier Bags.

designs and builds for conservation practices. With many EWP sites across the state, the Areas Offices continued working on their own EWP sites as well as implementing millions in aid to residents affected by fires and floods.

The NRCS NM Regional Geologist completed 112 well reports for New Mexico and Arizona. The geologist also provided geotechnical assistance for dam rehabilitation and the Watershed and Flood Protection Operations (WFPO) program projects. The geologist also assisted Hawaii with the completion of DSRs due to the 2023 Hawaii wildfires.

Watershed work with NRCS NM in 2023 included dam rehab work on the Tortugas Arroyo Watershed Dam Site #1 and the Santa Cruz Watershed Dam Site #1. Nine dam assessments on the condition of aging structures in NM were completed to further funding for additional structures needing rehab in the state.

NRCS NM Engineering continued work on WFPO programs such as the Belen Highline Canal Project and Rincon Arroyo Project that aim to provide flood protection in those areas. A new WFPO project was started as well to complete a Preliminary Investigation Findings Report (PIFR) on the watersheds impacted by the Hermit's Peak/Calf Canyon Fire covering about 1.5 million acres total. That PIFR was completed in 2023 with the goal of continuing work in that area by completing a watershed plan within the next few years.



NRCS NM Engineers discuss plans with NRCS Chief.

Resource Technology Services

Art Ariaz

State Resource Conservationist

The NRCS New Mexico Resource Technology Services staff (RTS) oversees the NRCS Ecological Sciences department (i.e., Agronomy, Range, Wildlife Biology, Forestry, Archeology, and Business Tools). RTS provides technical leadership to NRCS NM. The RTS Team ensures that NRCS NM has access to the latest scientific tools, technology, and training. The promotion of Soil Health by NRCS staff in New Mexico in conjunction with our various partners is a high priority for RTS because soil health is the foundation of all soil and water conservation. RTS ensures that our employees are prepared to provide the best technical assistance to our clients so that our clients can be the best they can be in managing their natural resources.

Cultural Resources

The RTS Cultural Resources Staff (CRS) was busy in FY2023. RTS CRS completed consultations and National Historic Preservation Act compliance work on 137 NRCS contracts amounting to 8,567 acres surveyed for cultural resources. The surveys identified and documented 148 cultural resources of archeological sites (prehistoric and historic), historic structures, and acequias. The RTS archeologists participated in Quality Assurance Reviews of the 5 field offices comprising Teams 2 (Albuquerque, Los Lunas, and Cuba field offices) and Team 11 (Clovis and Portales field offices). Additionally, the staff provided a week-long training on NRCS NM's cultural resource policy and procedures to new field office staff.

EWP continued to be a priority for the EWP Team Lead Archeologist in 2023. In addition to continuing efforts on the 7 EWP projects of the previous year, three new EWPs were identified and funded. Efforts to conduct archeological surveys in advance of vital emergency relief efforts for Hermit's Peak/Calf Canyon EWP, the largest fire and emergency response effort in NRCS NM history, resulted in surveying approximately 1,400 acres of burned forest prior to mastication for the aerial seeding and mulching efforts, 500 engineered structures to protect homes and infrastructure from flooding, and acequia systems impacted by the post-fire floods. Additional surveys for the McBride Fire, an EWP from the previous year, and the three new EWPs, Corn Ranch Flood in Chaves County, Black Fire in Sierra, Grant, and Luna Counties, and Rio en Medio Flood in Santa Fe County were also completed.

For the first time, RTS CRS staff participated in the "New Mexico Archaeology Fair" organized by the New Mexico Department of Cultural Affairs as part of the "Old Lincoln Days" celebration in Lincoln, New Mexico. The NRCS staff demonstrated the use and application of geophysical technologies (magnetics, soil resistance, ground penetrating

radar) to the archeological record and in cultural resource management.



North Area Archeologist staffing the NRCS table at the New Mexico Archeology Fair.



State Archeologist discussing the results of a geophysical survey of an archeological site with New Mexico State Historic Preservation Officer at the New Mexico Archeology Fair.



NRCS NM staff conducting a cultural resource survey on the eastern Plains of New Mexico.

Resource Inventories & Assessments

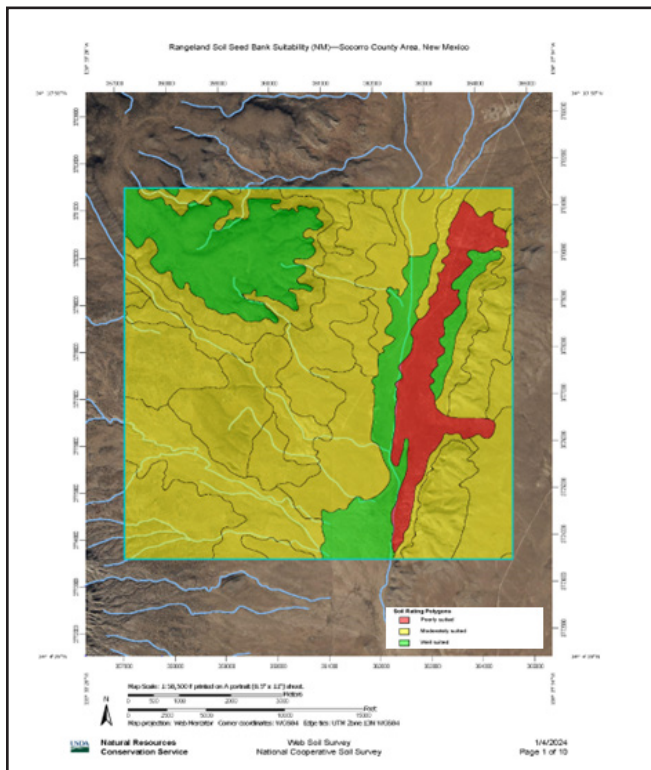
Rick Strait

State Soil Scientist

New Mexico Releases New Soil Seedbank Suitability Rating on Web Soil Survey

Soil seed banks are an integral component of rangeland ecosystem dynamics. The ability of a soil to accumulate and store viable plant seeds for an extended period of time is an important characteristic in seed bank maintenance that had not previously been quantified. The new Rangeland Soil Seedbank Suitability Rating may be used to guide the implementation of conservation practices including Range Planting, Brush Management, and Prescribed Grazing. Managing soils based on their ability to store seed over time can increase the likelihood that viable seeds will be present when favorable germination and establishment conditions are met.

This interpretation was developed through a five-year collaboration between NRCS NM, the NRCS West National Technical Center, New Mexico State University, and the University of Montana. The Rangeland Soil Seedbank Suitability is now available on [Web Soil Survey](#).

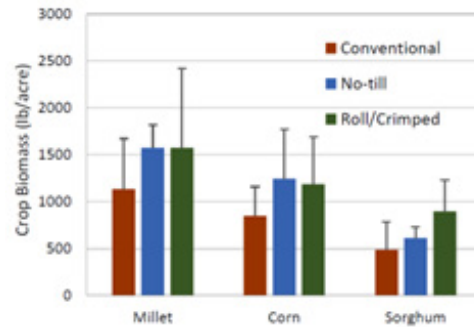


Ongoing PMC Forage Cover Crop Study Shows Promising Results

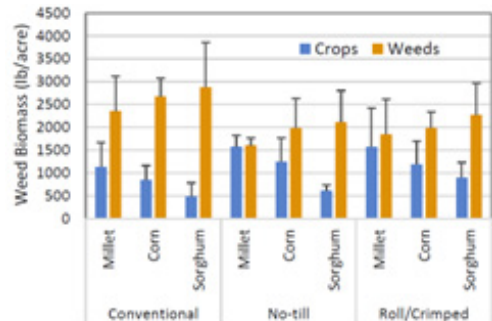
The latest results from a New Mexico Plant Materials Center (PMC) study indicate that forage producers may be able to increase yields while improving soil health. The

study includes a traditional coping system (Winter Wheat/ Summer Silage Grasses) modified to include legumes (Austrian Winter Pea/Cowpea) as a companion crop. Three soil management systems within the study include Conventional Tillage, No-Till, and No-Till with the stubble roller crimped at the end of the summer growing season.

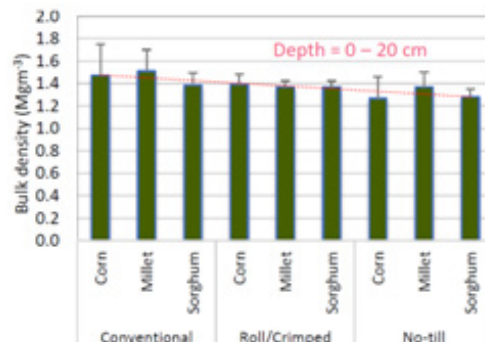
In 2023, Corn, Millet, and Sorghum biomass values were higher under No-Till and No-Till coupled with roller crimping.



Both of the No-Till treatments also showed greater weed suppression. Since herbicide options are limited in a mixed legume-grass crop, producers may be able to better manage weeds with No-Till.



Soil bulk density was improved in plots in No-Till and No-Till/Roller Crimped plots. As bulk density decreases, infiltration, aeration, available water capacity and other indicators of soil health increase.



As the study progresses, Resources Inventories & Assessments (RIA) anticipate that forage production and indicators of soil health will continue to improve. Other factors included in the study are relative forage quality, forage protein content, and microbial biomass.



Cover Crop Demonstration near San Patricio, New Mexico.



Biological Science Technician measuring Winter Oat cover crop plant density near Garfield, New Mexico.

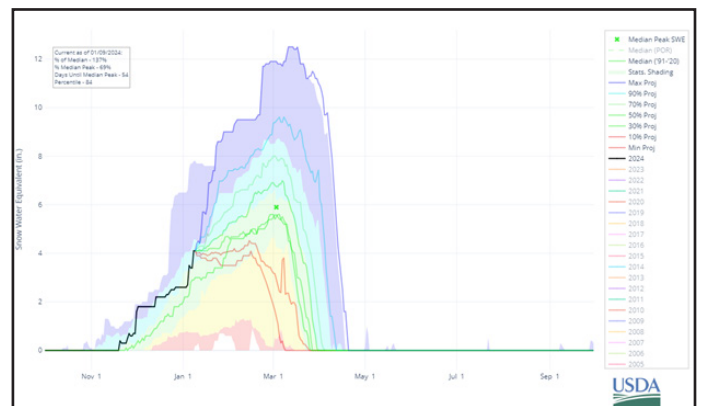
NRCS Partnerships Enhance Water Supply Forecasting on Tribal Lands

The New Mexico Snow Survey Program continues to build upon longstanding partnerships with the Navajo Nation, Zuni Pueblo, Taos Pueblo and other Tribes and Pueblos. These partnerships strengthen our Water Supply Forecasts across the state, thus benefitting tribal and non-tribal customers in basins including the Rio Grande, San Juan, and the Pecos.

Manual snow surveys supplement and support the automated data from our [automated snow telemetry \(SNOTEL\) system](#). In Northwestern New Mexico, Tribal Partners collaborate with NRCS staff to conduct these surveys.



Navajo Nation Water Management Branch, perform a manual ground truth measurement at the Navajo Whiskey Creek SNOTEL site.



Snow Water Equivalent Projection Chart from the [Rice Park SNOTEL site](#). Partner surveyors from Zuni Pueblo ground truth this site on manual snow courses in the Zuni Mountains. Data from the SNOTEL site and manual surveys support water supply forecasts for the Little Colorado and Rio Grande – Elephant Butte Basins.

South Area

Adrian Tafoya

South Area Conservationist

Bear Creek to Signal Peak Joint Chiefs' Project

Team 7 - Success Story

The Silver City field office--in cooperation with the US Forest Service, Grant Soil and Water Conservation District, and New Mexico Energy Minerals and Natural Resources Department--has been successfully promoting and implementing the Bear Creek to Signal Peak Joint Chiefs' Project. A total of 18 projects have been funded between FY2022 & 2023 totaling over \$433k.

These projects are focused on reducing hazardous fuels and watershed function through soil stabilization along with improvements to wildlife habitat. Common practices include brush management, forest stand improvement, woody residue treatment, erosion control structures, and structures for wildlife. Several of these projects either border previous projects or future work planned by the USFS through this Joint Chiefs' project. By utilizing a geographical resource concern-based approach, Silver City and the surrounding communities are actively strengthening their resilience to wildfires in the future.



Before - starting Basal Area of 110 with over 430 plants/acre.



After - ending BA of 70 with less than 100 plants/ac. All work completed with hand-tools and managed by lop and scatter.



Before - 174 Junipers/ac.



After - 50 Junipers/ac with brush management.

North Area

Jason Martin

North Area Conservationist

Bell Rock Livestock Association

Team 2 - Success Story

The Bell Rock Livestock Association derives its name from the distinctive bell-shaped rock formation atop the nearby Mesa Gigante cliffs in New Mexico. The association, created by the Laguna Pueblo in the early 1990s, started on land that once was sheep herding pasture but had become vacant for many years.

In 2023, NRCS started helping the association to set up their pastures for better utilization for cattle grazing and wildlife through the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP). For the cattle, the association will use forage sampling to help maintain the quality and quantity of forage for animal health and productivity. By forage sampling throughout the rangeland, the association can determine what exactly each pasture holds as far as plant nutritional values and plant quantity and what minerals might be needed to help keep their cattle in the best shape possible for breeding and calving season. This also ensures the cattle will have a good pasture available for weaning time.

For wildlife, the association and NRCS are working together with the Laguna Pueblo Natural Resources department to develop a comprehensive Grazing Management Plan. The plan aims to reverse the decline and establish a better antelope, elk, and deer population in certain areas of the rangeland. Deferment periods in pastures, when wildlife is calving, will minimize disruptions and disturbances as much as possible. Two pastures will be deferred from May 15th -August 15th for the next four years. This rest benefits fawning for species like the pronghorn antelope and benefits the health and vigor of the existing vegetation, especially during the growing season. The deferment periods are scheduled to fall in place with the grazing schedule outlined in the grazing plan.



Cattle in front of the Bell Rock formation.



NRCS NM Planners in the field.



Hermit's Peak/Calf Canyon Disaster Assistance

In the summer of 2022, extreme drought conditions, low snowpack, and high winds combined to create the worst wildfire season New Mexico had ever seen. The largest and most devastating of those fires was the Hermit's Peak/Calf Canyon fire. Ultimately, the fire would burn close to 342,000 acres (over 500 sq. miles) and over 900 structures, becoming the largest wildfire in New Mexico history. For residents of the affected communities, the disaster was exacerbated even more when monsoon season rains followed on the burn scar, causing massive and devastating flooding.

Small communities in and around the area like Mora and Rociada were directly hit while the surrounding area, including the town of Las Vegas, felt the significant impact of the disaster. There are no good disasters, but this one particularly hurt, as unique landscapes, histories, and cultures dating back centuries were threatened or lost.

NRCS is a locally-led agency, with field offices in nearly every county of the state. Many employees who live and work in the community were touched by the disaster. Kenneth Branch, the NRCS NM Assistant State Conservationist for Programs, grew up in the community and graduated from Mora High School. As the fire spread, he was monitoring the situation and meeting with Gerald Romero and Wanda Martinez, the District Managers of the Tierra Y Montes and Western Mora Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCD) to begin planning how NRCS might implement their Emergency Watershed Protection (EWP) Program to aid the community. Even as the fire burned on in various areas, NRCS had boots on the ground completing assessments and damage survey reports where possible.

On May 4, 2022, President Biden issued a major disaster declaration in the state and ordered federal aid be made available to support the recovery effort. Eventually, the government did accept responsibility for the fire. President

Biden announced that the U.S. Government would cover 100% of the costs caused by the Hermit's Peak/Calf Canyon fire. Shortly after, NRCS Chief Terry Cosby announced a historic waiver of cost-share requirements for EWP assistance to the affected communities. NRCS would fund 100% of the cost of post-wildfire recovery efforts, allowing NRCS to use EWP funds to implement much-needed aerial seeding — a successful post-wildfire conservation practice that helps reduce soil erosion, restore ground cover, and establish native plant species, all things needed for the burn scar to mitigate the impacts of any potential future flooding. By early August, NRCS NM was implementing one of the largest aerial seeding and mulching operations in NRCS history.



NRCS Partners loading seed onto a plane as part of one of the largest aerial operations in NRCS history.

Tierra Y Montes SWCD and Western Mora SWCD, were critical partners in obtaining permissions from landowners to seed and mulch. The SWCDs and NRCS NM attended numerous round-table, town halls, and informational sharing events with the community to inform and explain the benefits of EWP for protecting not only a landowner's own land, property, and structures, but potentially also protecting the land and property of any neighbors who might be further down the watershed.



NRCS Partners were critical in informing the community about EWP and obtaining landowner permissions.

Other partners played key roles in delivery assistance through EWP. Western States Reclamation was a company experienced with wildfire recovery in the region that committed to hiring local crews to harvest burned trees to mulch so that no foreign materials were put back on the land. The Curtis and Curtis Seed Company, a New Mexico company and decades-long partner with NRCS NM, was able to harvest native grass seeds not far from the actual burn scar for the aerial seeding operation to ensure the burned land was seeded with grasses native to the region. Aerotech, another local New Mexican company employed a fleet of GPS-guided aircraft and highly skilled pilots to drop the mulch and seed back on the land with precision. Crews on the ground and in the air operated around the clock until early November when winter conditions halted the first round of aerial seeding and mulching. At the end of the first seeding phase in 2022, NRCS NM and partners were able to seed over 23,000 acres and mulch over 8,000 acres. This would represent the first phase of what would evolve into a three-phase strategy for implementing EWP for Hermit's Peak/Calf Canyon (HPCC) disaster assistance.



NRCS State Rangeland Management Specialist Jim Armendariz shows the dramatic results from aerial seeding in the Spring of 2023.

Starting that fall of 2022 and continuing through the winter, NRCS began the second phase of EWP which consisted of installing point protection structures to protect homes and structures from more flooding in the event that heavy rain fell on the burn scar. At first, NRCS utilized jersey barriers. But then a better solution was found with flood barrier bags, which were lighter and easier to deploy, cheaper, and an all-around much more agile solution that could be put in place quickly at scale. Other flood protection measures included debris removal, pit ponds, and earth diversions. NRCS engineers

and local contractors worked tirelessly across over 80 sites throughout the winter of 2022 and through the summer of 2023.



Local contractors installing point protection bags to protect homes from potential flooding.

During this time, NRCS NM was also actively looking for other ways to help the affected communities. In the early spring of 2023, John "Cyle" Sharp and Paula Gutierrez, were hired by the Hermit's Peak/Calf Canyon Claims Office (HPCCO). Both were fellow New Mexicans and had worked with NRCS NM before in their former professions. They reached out to NRCS NM and began working closely with Kenneth Branch, ASTC for Programs, Kenneth Alcon, former State Resource Conservationist, and Xavier Montoya, State Conservationist. The group worked together to come up with a plan that they presented to their agencies and was approved.



Staff from the Hermit's Peak/Calf Canyon Claims Office and NRCS NM partnered up to figure out better ways to compensate claimants.

After some serious vetting, mock trials, and some help from the New Mexico State University's Ag Economics program, through Dr. Lillywhite, to develop a payment schedule that reflects 100% of the cost, USDA NRCS and FEMA's HPCCO were able to make an agreement in which NRCS NM could provide landowners a Conservation Restoration Plan written by certified planners using established NRCS conservation practices which could streamline the compensation process for claimants on their natural resources. Claimants could request a Conservation Restoration Plan from NRCS and

NRCS would visit their property to provide an estimate that claimants could take to the Claim's Office for compensation. The Conservation Restoration Plans documents damages to natural resources including costs to repair/restore the damage and implementation specifications. FEMA and USDA announced the agreement on May 22, 2023, and immediately began accepting requests.



HPCC Group Lead, Eddie Foster delivers a Conservation Restoration Plan.

To meet the overwhelming demand that would come with providing Conservation Restoration Plans, NRCS NM needed to dramatically increase its capacity in the area. NRCS NM required all of their employees to contribute at least two weeks to help write Conservation Restoration Plans. Many employees were inspired to stay longer and volunteered to extend their details to contribute to the recovery effort. A core of 12 NRCS NM staff stayed on assignment from May to October. Eddie Foster, South Area Resource Conservationist acted as the group lead for the operations on the ground. Work on Conservation Restoration Plans went 12 hours a day, 7 days a week. Throughout this time, teams of NRCS staff and partners also continued work on EWP, seeding, and point protection work. Staff remained on assignment until winter once again halted operations.



NRCS NM crew often worked 12 hours a day, 7 days a week.

At the end of calendar year 2023, NRCS NM had completed and delivered 642 out of 914 received applications requesting Conservation Restoration Plans. That represented over 100,000 acres and over \$450,000,000 in losses documented. Approximately \$130 Million of work

was completed and paid through EWP, which included aerial seeding (50,000 acres) and mulching (30,000 acres), flood barrier protection, sediment catchments, earth diversions, and debris removal, across 165 sites.

Starting in 2023 and going into 2024, NRCS NM is continuing to expand its recovery assistance for HPCC by implementing a third phase of its EWP program to work on Acequias affected by the HPCC fire and flooding. NRCS NM is working with the New Mexico Department of Finance and Administration (DFA), the New Mexico Department of Transportation (NMDOT), the the New Mexico Association of Conservation Districts (NMACD), the local Soil and Water Conservation Districts, (SWCDs), the New Mexico Acequia Association (NMAA), and contractors to coordinate work on over 60 Acequia Projects. Most Acequias need engineering assistance which will be completed by NMACD or NRCS NM. NRCS NM is also working with the US Forest Service to jointly implement projects on Acequias that start on USFS lands.



NRCS NM assesses a damaged Acequia.

NRCS NM is also looking towards providing assistance on a longer-term basis through its watershed operations. NRCS NM started the Preliminary Investigative Findings Report (PIFR) process with the New Mexico Acequia Association as the sponsor. Normally a PIFR takes 12 or more months to complete. Working overtime, and with the help of Merceidez Fabok, a NRCS Natural Resource Specialist from Nebraska, NRCS NM was able to complete this process in about three months. Once the PIFR is reviewed by NHQ, NRCS NM will move on to the planning phase which could take 2-3 years. NRCS NM hopes to complete this in 1-2 years.

As the next spring and summer quickly approaches, NRCS NM is eager to continue supporting the communities affected by this devastating fire.



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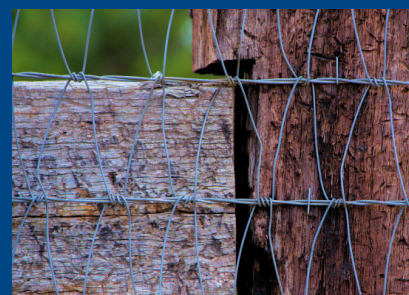
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Aztec	(505) 334-3090
Carlsbad	(575) 887-3506
Carrizozo	(575) 648-2941
Chama	(575) 756-2581
Clayton	(575) 374-9461
Clovis	(575) 762-4769
Crownpoint	(505) 786-7094
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