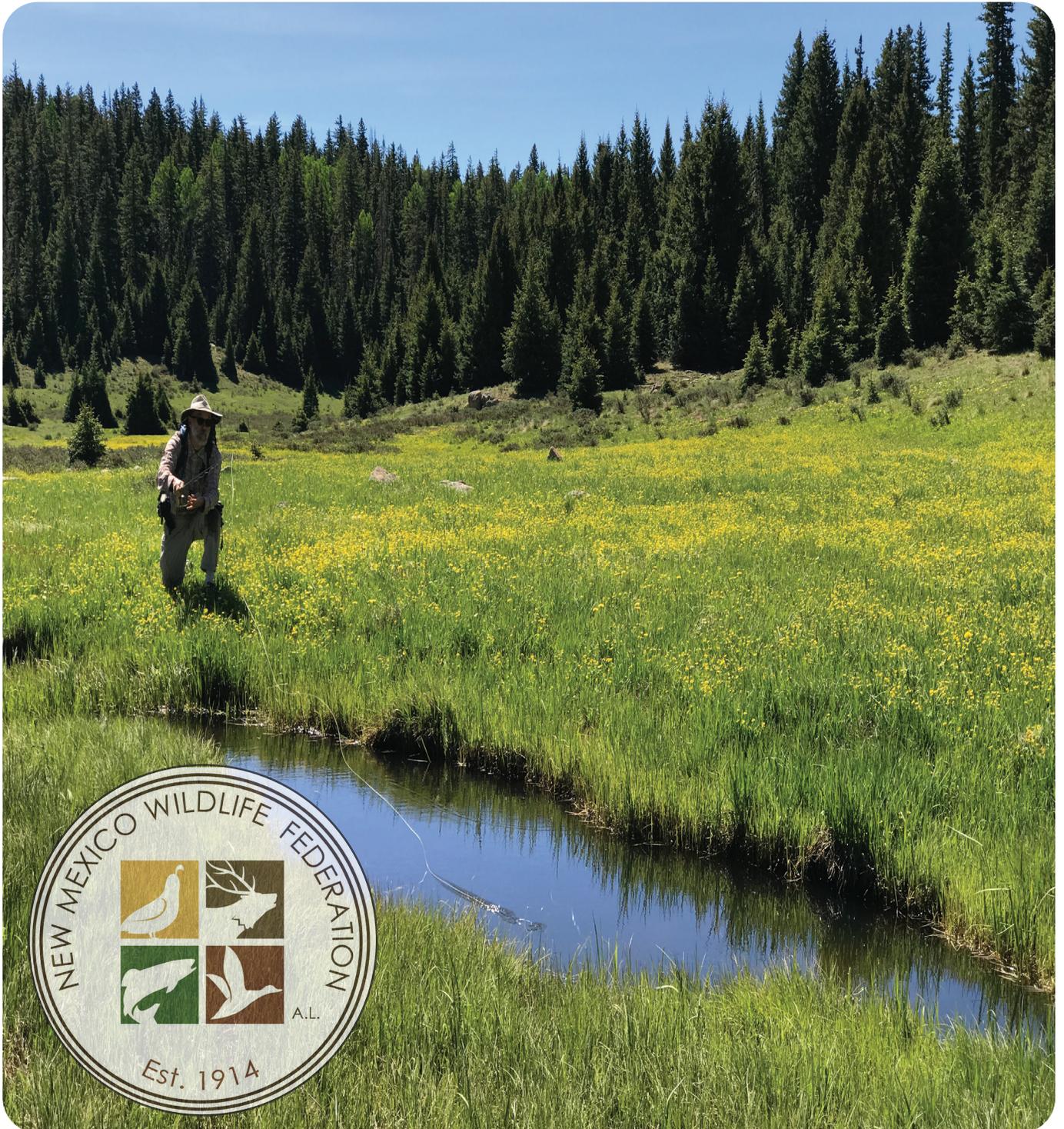


# A ROADMAP FOR CONSERVING NEW MEXICO'S OUTDOOR HERITAGE

New Mexico Wildlife Federation  
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Loss of nature is one of the greatest threats to New Mexico's future.

Our state's identity stands on a foundation of land, water, and unique ecological beauty -- the essential components of our economy and our outdoor way of life. Habitat destruction not only threatens hunting and angling but our very ability to continue to live in the place we cherish.

New Mexico, and the United States as a whole, is losing nature at an alarming pace. Nationally, a football field's worth of natural lands is lost to human development every thirty seconds.<sup>1</sup> In New Mexico, nearly 760,000 acres of natural lands were lost to development between 2001-2017 -- an area more than four times the size of all New Mexico Department of Game and Fish-owned wildlife management areas.

The forces driving the loss of natural lands include the expanding footprint of urban and residential areas, transportation infrastructure and oil and gas development.

The loss of natural lands and the effects of climate change are interrelated. As the climate warms, stresses increase on water supplies and wildlife. Loss of nature speeds up spring runoff, harming natural features that hold water supplies and snowpack. Similarly, wildlife species are directly threatened by loss of their habitat, raising the risk of extinction for species unable to adapt.

Conservation of natural lands, meanwhile, provides New Mexico increased resilience from severe weather, droughts, floods, and wildfires. Protecting nature is the best climate strategy.

New Mexico relies on its lands and waters to support its economy, sustain traditional and indigenous communities, provide food, preserve biodiversity and maintain the health and wellbeing of its citizens.

Our state also has a long and robust tradition of hunting, fishing and outdoor recreation. Loss of natural lands and waters threatens each of these values and uses. The state needs a significant increase in landscape-scale conservation and restoration to connect wildlife habitats and safeguard wildlife migration corridors. Additional protections will improve access to outdoor recreation for all New Mexicans.



To safeguard lands and waters, scientists are urging ambitious conservation to stop the loss of nature. Efforts are coalescing around the goal of conserving 30 percent of lands and waters by 2030 (“30x30”) as a means to help solve climate change and reverse the decline of America’s wildlife, waters and natural lands. Scientists have set this goal as the minimum amount necessary to reverse the decline and support climate resilience and species survival.

Political action to support this goal is growing. Nationally, a resolution has been introduced in the U.S. Congress to commit the nation to a 30x30 goal. New Mexico Senator Tom Udall and New Mexico Representative Deb Haaland are lead sponsors. Through their leadership, New Mexico is becoming a national leader in the 30x30 effort.

Of the nearly 78 million acres of land in New Mexico, about 35 percent is federal land, 10 percent is tribal land, 12 percent state land, and a little less than half is private. Using data from the United States Geological Survey’s Gap Analysis Project, the Center for American Progress estimated that just 6 percent of New Mexico land is managed to protect wildlife with durable conservation protections.<sup>2</sup>

Conserving nature is politically popular in New Mexico. Colorado College’s State of the Rockies Project 2020 Conservation in the West Poll found that 72 percent of New Mexicans consider themselves to be conservationists. A remarkable 78 percent voice support for a national goal of conserving 30 percent of America’s lands and oceans by 2030. Sixty percent of polled residents also want to see action on climate, a 15-percentage point increase since 2011.<sup>3</sup>



# We must set New Mexico on a path to protecting 30 percent of the state's lands and waters by 2030 and join with our federal delegation and other states in affirming that conserving nature is a priority.

The American Nature Campaign has defined principles to support the 30x30 effort that reflect the values and needs of diverse communities across the country. These include:

1. Supporting locally-led conservation;
2. Working toward a more equitable and inclusive vision for nature;
3. Honoring the sovereignty of tribal nations;
4. Protect hunting, fishing, and traditional uses;
5. Supporting private conservation; and
6. Being guided by science.<sup>4</sup>

New Mexico already has taken some important steps to address climate change and protect wildlife that are complementary to the 30x30 goal. In 2019, Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham signed an executive order<sup>5</sup> on climate change that laid out the challenges faced by the state and set up a state government task force to make recommendations and policy changes to reduce New Mexico's carbon pollution. Also, in 2019, the legislature enacted the Wildlife Corridors Act<sup>6</sup>, which takes an important first step towards identification and protection of migration corridors and important habitat.

A coalition of hunting and fishing groups, led by the Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation and Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership, has voiced support for this conservation effort. The coalition has begun to identify resources to guide land protection initiatives, including state wildlife action plans identifying species of greatest conservation need.<sup>7</sup>

New Mexico has a strong conservation track record. The tools for protecting our lands, water, and wildlife already exist, and we know how to use them in innovative and collaborative ways. By reviewing case studies of conservation success stories, as well as efforts currently underway from all regions of the state, a roadmap emerges of how New Mexico may achieve the 30x30 goal.

While the rate of conservation will need to be significantly scaled up to meet the goal, these collaborative efforts point toward a "New Mexican Way" of achieving protections that is stakeholder responsive, cooperative and beneficial to all people in our state, no matter where they live or their socioeconomic station.



These conservation case studies also highlight how communities and economies can thrive with and because of conservation:

**Sabinoso Wilderness:** In northeast New Mexico, an increase in conservation protections helped increase public access. The 19,625-acre Sabinoso Wilderness is managed by the Bureau of Land Management and was designated wilderness in 2009. Previously, as a BLM Wilderness Study Area, the area was entirely surrounded by state and private lands and had no public access. However, after its designation as wilderness, efforts by NGOs to acquire additional lands resulted in the BLM opening public access in 2017. In this case, increased conservation led to more equitable access in a rural part of the state.

**Mesilla Valley Bosque State Park:** Near Las Cruces, the Mesilla Valley Bosque State Park conserves a riverside forest and restored wetlands. The newest park in the state park system, it is a popular destination for biking, walking and birdwatching and is open only for day use. The 305-acre urban park is the result of collaboration among multiple state agencies, local agencies, and NGOs. Collaborative efforts like this are an innovative model for expanding parks and restoring natural lands that is gaining currency throughout the West.

**Valle de Oro National Wildlife Refuge:** Another urban park with an emphasis on restoration and engaging the local community is the Valle de Oro National Wildlife Refuge in Albuquerque. Centered around an old dairy farm that was nearly developed for houses, Valle de Oro is a restoration work in progress, with plans to restore the riverside forest, or bosque, and improving habitat for migratory wildlife. The 570-acre refuge was a collaboration among NGOs and local, state and federal agencies, working in concert to create the US Fish and Wildlife Service's first urban national wildlife refuge. Community engagement plays a major role in refuge management, helping to build equitable, community-driven conservation and restoration.

**Rio Grande Preservation:** The New Mexico Wildlife Federation has administered grants through the North American Wetland Conservation Act that have seen the protection and enhancement of over 5,000 acres in the Middle Rio Grande. Through the efforts of project officer Alan Hamilton, the grant program has been responsible for purchasing conservation easements on critical waterfowl properties as well as habitat restoration and improvement projects.



**Private Land Conservation:** Private landowners around the state have permanently protected critical wildlife habitat by voluntarily placing more than a quarter-million acres of private property into conservation easements. These measures mark a win-win for landowners and the environment, protecting habitat and wildlife corridors.

**Upper Pecos River:** Northeast of Santa Fe, an effort is underway to protect the Upper Pecos River watershed as an Outstanding National Resource Water (ONRW). The Pecos River is a key source of water for eastern New Mexico, and the ONRW designation by the state, under the federal Clean Water Act, will help to ensure that water quality is not degraded in the future. This conservation tool does not affect existing uses like grazing, water rights, or acequias, and in conjunction with other land protection efforts, provides important protections for aquatic and riparian ecosystems. It has been used in Forest Service wilderness areas, and further north in the Valle Vidal Unit of the Carson National Forest.

In total, ONRWs protect 1.4 million acres of watershed in New Mexico. The petition for the Upper Pecos was submitted by San Miguel County, the Village of Pecos, the New Mexico Acequia Association, and other groups, and is pending before the New Mexico Water Quality Control Commission. The Upper Pecos petition would add to the existing protections upstream in the Pecos Wilderness, where tributary streams of the Pecos are already protected as both ONRWs and wilderness.

**Gila River Wild and Scenic Designation:** In the southwest of the state, an effort to designate the Gila and San Francisco Rivers as a Wild and Scenic River is gaining traction. Legislation has been introduced by New Mexico Senators Tom Udall and Martin Heinrich.



The Gila River is the last free-flowing river in the state and is treasured for hiking, hunting and fishing. Including the Gila and many of its tributaries in the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System will enhance conservation of its outstanding values and protection of water supplies in this dry region. Additionally, this designation would be a powerful complement to the Gila Wilderness, the world's oldest wilderness area, designated in 1924.

The effort to protect the Gila River has garnered an impressive and diverse list of supporters from outdoor recreationists, veterans' groups, hunting and angling organizations, businesses, faith-based groups, local governments and conservation organizations.

**Rio Grande del Norte:** In 2013, President Barack Obama proclaimed the 242,555-acre Rio Grande del Norte National Monument under the provisions of the Antiquities Act. The monument complements a 1968 designation of a stretch of the Upper Rio Grande as one of the original eight rivers protected under the federal Wild and Scenic Rivers System.

Following the designation of the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument, two wilderness areas have been designated within its boundary. The Taos Plateau has seen layers of incremental protections that protect wildlife, scenery and the river. Hunters and anglers have been an important constituency in protecting this landscape, and the area is of critical importance to wildlife migration.

**White Sands National Park:** Although it's the nation's newest national park, White Sands has existed as a national monument since 1933. With over 600,000 visitors per year, White Sands was already the National Park Service's most popular unit in New Mexico. The national park status is projected to increase that visitation by 20 percent and power a 25-percent increase in spending in the surrounding communities such as Alamogordo. The upgrade legislation was sponsored by New Mexico Senator Martin Heinrich and Representative Xochitl Torres Small. The effort received wide support from local elected leaders and chambers of commerce. The legislation added acres to the new park and through boundary modifications improves the management of the park. The new park encompasses a total of 145,762 acres and protects the world's largest gypsum dune field, including gypsum hearthmounds found nowhere else, and is also home to the globe's largest collection of Ice Age fossilized footprints.

**Bisti/De-Na-Zin Wilderness:** In the northwest portion of the state, the Bisti/De-Na-Zin Wilderness is a 45,000-acre badland landscape established by Congress in 1984 and expanded by 2,250 acres in 2019. It is located along the Trails of the Ancients Byway, one of New Mexico's Scenic Byways. In addition to the colorful badlands and whimsical hoodoos, the Bisti contains a trove of cultural sites dating back over 10,000 years that include parts of the Chacoan Great North Road. After several media pieces on the Bisti in recent years, there has been an increase in visitation driven by an interest in photography of the other-worldly rock formations.



These case studies all demonstrate the variety of ways that New Mexicans have come together to conserve important lands and waters. They lay down a blueprint of how future protections can be modeled and achieved. The hallmarks of these case studies have been community involvement, stakeholder collaboration, leadership on public lands from New Mexico's congressional delegation and layering incremental protections over time. They should give policy makers confidence that the tools exist to conserve 30 percent of lands and waters in our state.

Many of the examples above apply to federal public lands. However, there are tools available to conserve private and state lands as well. More than a quarter-million acres of private lands have been protected using voluntary conservation easements. With state encouragement and appropriate incentives for these easements, much more could be conserved through voluntary measures that respect private property rights.

Opportunities exist for additional conservation of state-owned lands. The state has the authority and tools to increase the number of state parks and state wildlife areas, but doing so would require additional funding. Expansion of the use of long-term conservation and recreation leases for State Land Office lands is another tool with exciting potential. New Mexico's land management agencies can have significant influence over federal land management by working with federal agencies on resource management plans and identifying areas in the state in need of additional federal protection.

Committing New Mexico to the 30x30 vision is a feasible and popular policy goal. It complements the national 30x30 goal and aligns New Mexico with a growing number of states that are linking climate action with land and water conservation. As the number of supporting states grows, it helps build the political support in Congress to conserve more federal public lands.

At its core, the 30x30 goal is a commitment to protect the economy and outdoor way of life of New Mexicans.

Conserving lands and waters not only protects the cultural foundations of our state, it also makes us more resilient in the face of a warming climate. We know the conservation tools and have the scientific expertise to reach the 30x30 goal. However, we must mobilize the political action needed to meet the urgency of the crisis. The New Mexico Congressional delegation already plays an important leadership role that could turn the tide in the national effort to protect nature. Now our state elected officials can become leaders in state-level responses. Future generations of New Mexicans will reap the benefits of a sustainable economy, adequate water supplies, clean air, open natural lands and abundant wildlife.



## Footnotes

1. David M. Theobald and others, "Loss and fragmentation of natural lands in the coterminous U.S. from 2001 to 2017" (Truckee, CA: Conservation Science Partners, 2019), available at <https://www.csp-inc.org/public/CSP%20Disappearing%20US%20Exec%20Summary%20011819.pdf>.
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3. [https://www.coloradocollege.edu/other/state-oftherockies/conservationinthewest/2020/2020-conservation-in-the-west-poll-data/2020\\_SotR\\_State-FactSheets\\_NM.pdf](https://www.coloradocollege.edu/other/state-oftherockies/conservationinthewest/2020/2020-conservation-in-the-west-poll-data/2020_SotR_State-FactSheets_NM.pdf)
4. The American Nature Campaign <https://www.natureamerica.org/>
5. [https://www.governor.state.nm.us/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/EO\\_2019-003.pdf](https://www.governor.state.nm.us/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/EO_2019-003.pdf)
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