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TREE FARM BULLETIN

FOREST LEGACY PROGRAM

By Carol Bada, Forest Legacy Program Manager, NM Forestry Division

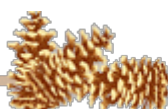
The U.S. Congress created the [Forest Legacy Program](#) in 1990 to help landowners, state and local governments, and land trusts identify and protect environmentally important private forest lands that are threatened by present or future conversion to non-forest uses. Since its creation the Forest Legacy Program has conserved over 2.8 million acres of forest land and expanded across the country to 53 states and territories.

The program is funded by the Land and Water Conservation Fund, which invests a small percentage of federal offshore drilling fees toward the conservation of important land, water, and recreation areas for all Americans. The passage of the Great American Outdoors Act provides permanent funding for the Land and Water Conservation Fund. For current information on implementation of the Great American Outdoors Act [please visit our website](#).

The Forest Legacy Program is authorized through the federal Farm Bill and made available to the State of New Mexico by a grant from the USDA Forest Service (USFS). Landowners who choose to sell conservation easements to the state may sell the development rights to all or part of their properties. They are encouraged to form partnerships with land trust organizations that can help them with their property appraisals, and tax or estate planning. Up to 75% of the easement value is provided through a federal grant. The other 25% must be funded by non-federal sources or donated by the landowner.

Conservation easements are held in perpetuity by the state and effectively retire the rights to subdivide and develop the properties for non-forest uses. Participating landowners retain all other rights to their properties including occupancy, use for enjoyment or profit, and transfer to heirs or sale to new owners. Property taxes are paid on the retained rights, as determined by the County Assessor. These private forests continue to produce wood products, provide wildlife habitats, and open space, contribute to watershed integrity, help combat climate change through carbon sequestration, and are protected from urban sprawl.

New Mexico currently has three Forest Legacy conservation easements. The Horse Springs conservation easement consists of 5,000 acres in Catron County. The High-Country Ranch conservation



easement is 11,655 acres in Rio Arriba County. The Vallecitos Mountain Refuge conservation easement consists of 132 acres and is also located in Rio Arriba country.

There is another Forest Legacy Program project currently in progress in Rio Arriba County. This is the Brazos Cliffs project near Chama, NM; 6,780 acres of the Brazos River watershed.

Forest Legacy Program Eligibility Criteria

To be eligible for inclusion, a property must be 75% forested with timber or riparian woodland species and meet the following four eligibility criteria. Properties less than 40 acres in size will generally not be considered unless they contain significant features, such as endangered species habitat or rare types of forest.

1. Threat

To meet this criterion, the property must be threatened by at least one of the following:

- Conversion to non-forest uses;
- Further subdivision into smaller parcels.

2. Public Values

To meet this criterion, the property must possess one or more of the following public values:

- Natural aesthetic or scenic values;
- Public education opportunities;
- Public recreation opportunities;
- Riparian areas;
- Fish and wildlife habitat;
- Threatened or endangered species habitat;
- Cultural and historical resources;
- Traditional forest uses; and/or
- Other important ecological values.

3. Planning

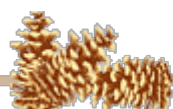
To meet this criterion, the property must have one of the following:

A Forest Stewardship Plan or equivalent forest management plan approved by the State Forester or his or her designated representative in accordance with National Forest Stewardship Program criteria, or where land is acquired in fee or timber management rights are transferred in the conservation easement, a management plan will be developed by the organization acquiring those rights.

4. Funding

To meet this criterion, there must be non-federal matching funds of at least 25% of the Conservation Easement value available in the form of cash and/or in-kind contributions.

Private forest owners and local government managers who wish to apply to the [NM Forest Legacy Program](#) can contact Carol Bada at carol.bada@state.nm.us





STATE OF NEW MEXICO: UPPER RIO CHAMA RIVER WATERSHED

Adjacent to the Carson National Forest, the three-phase acquisition of the Upper Rio Chama River Watershed property, enabled by the USDA Forest Service Forest Legacy Program (FLP), The Trust for Public Land, and the Forest Trust, took nearly a decade to complete. It now protects 11,655 acres of working forests and riparian areas. The project buffers the National Forest from the encroachment of private property development, reduces the wildland urban interface and associated wildland firefighting costs, preserves unique old growth forest, and supports a critical watershed.



As a working high mountain ranch, the property has been in the ownership of the same family for 44 years. With concerns about future management, the landowners wanted to pursue permanent protection of the property through the Forest Legacy Program. Without this, the property was at risk of fragmentation into 59 parcels of 140 acres, reducing the likelihood of active forest management.

The Upper Rio Chama River Watershed lies within the Northern Rio Grande Natural Heritage Area, designated by Congress in 2006, as well as within the federal multi-state, multi-partner Upper Rio Grande: Mi Tierra Encantada Collaborative Landscape. Situated within the viewshed of the Continental Divide National Scenic Trail (CDT), protection of the property supports the CDT's management plan. The Rio Arriba County Comprehensive Plan encourages the use of conservation easements to protect critical lands, including the property, within the County's Headwaters Zoning District.

The property is also ranked in the Statewide Forest Resource Assessment as a "priority working landscape," a large, unfragmented block of land with high economic potential, which is at risk of conversion to non-forest use, and in the 2021 Forest Action Plan as a "priority watershed". The property is also enrolled in a Natural Resources Conservation Service conservation reserve program to enhance the riparian habitat.



Economic benefits of this project include both forest products and hunting access. 75% of the mixed conifer and spruce-fir forests can be commercially harvested and are under active management. According to the 2013 Chama Healthy Forest and Wood Utilization Study, the area holds considerable potential for commercial biomass utilization. The property also supports a healthy population of big-game species, including elk. According to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, in 2011 the estimated economic impact of hunting in New was \$620 million. Managing the property's elk population for hunting is a boon to the local economy. The landowner alone accrues \$90,000 per year from the activity.



Potential habitat for 12 additional species of management concern is also present on this property.

In the arid southwest, the Rio Chama, which flows into the endangered Rio Grande, is a critical resource for both the traditional villages of the Tierra Amarilla Land Grant as well as New Mexico's largest city. 90% of Albuquerque's domestic water supply comes from the Rio Grande. The protection of the unfragmented, high, forested mountain project lands ensures their continued ability to act as "water factories" for the rest of the state.

Through a decade of persistence and patience, all 11,655 acres of this property are now covered by conservation easements. Protection of the Upper

Rio Chama River Watershed through the FLP ensures the public will continue to reap the benefits, from forest products to watershed protection, of this scenic property in perpetuity.

"The Lloyd/Estrin/Hill family is deeply grateful that, through the Forest Legacy Program, we have been able to protect the precious resources of the 11,655 acre High Country Ranch."

— Robert Estrin

Property is habitat for 48 observed species; those in need of special protection include Rio Grande cutthroat trout, Canada lynx, Mexican spotted owl, boreal toad, boreal owl, and northern goshawk.



AT-A-GLANCE



11,655 acres of working forests and riparian areas.



Project protects 18 miles of tributary creeks, including 13 miles of Rio Chama headwaters.



Eastern edge of the property is adjacent to 18 miles of the Continental Divide National Scenic Trail.



Property was at risk of fragmentation into 59 parcels of 140 acres, reducing the likelihood of active forest management.



Property has been in the ownership of the same family for 44 years.



Property supports a healthy population of big-game species, including elk.

Top L: High Country Ranch Fall late summer 2017. (Photo: Joe Carrillo); Middle L: Water catchment. (Photo: Henry Carey); Middle R: Hunters 2018. (Photo: Joe Carrillo); Middle R: Creek 2017. (Photo: Joe Carrillo)

For more information, visit <https://www.emnrd.nm.gov/std/forest-legacy/>.

"The above content was produced by the Western Forestry Leadership Coalition, in cooperation with western state forestry agencies and the USDA Forest Service."

COMMITTEE MEETING

All Tree Farmers are invited and encouraged to take part in our 3rd New Mexico Tree Farm Committee Meeting of the year (three held annually). Please join us on Thursday, December 16th, 2021 at the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish office located at 7816 Alamo Rd NW, Albuquerque, NM 87120. Come out and hear what other tree farmers have been up to and share your tree farm accomplishments with the group. We look forward to visiting with you. If you have any questions, please contact Arnie Friedt at arnie.friedt@state.nm.us

