

New Mexico Rivers & Waters

Protecting the resource on which all life depends



Photo by Irene Owsley

Water for our future. What grassroots conservation can do to help secure water for people and nature.

New Mexico faces daunting challenges with water shortages. Aridification is our new normal and with it decreased snowpack, increased wildfires, drier soils, and reduced stream flows. These facts impact both human and wildlife populations.

At New Mexico Wild, we understand that to protect “Wilderness, wildlife, and water” in our state we must do more to mitigate these impacts.

There is more we can do. In fact,

there are many strategies we can pursue through advocacy, education, and policy changes to help our communities and our natural world cope with these conditions both now and into the future.

As a grassroots organization, New Mexico Wild works with many constituents and communities to build support and provide solutions for positive change and a better path toward a secure water future for people and nature.

New Mexico ranks 4th in the country for biodiversity, 2nd in the number of bird species, and 3rd for reptiles and mammals. Water is the common link for protecting wildlife in an arid state like New Mexico.



Water governance in the West is a patchwork of federal, state, Tribal, municipal, and local jurisdictions which make coordination and developing solutions difficult. Added to that, many of our state-level water agencies have not recovered from severe budget cuts in 2008 and continue to lack mandates, tools, and resources to prioritize ecological health.

While this is our reality today, demands on our water resources from many parts of our community will force change. New Mexico Wild has a long history of collaborative and constructive coalition-building and we are applying those skills to issues of water to assure that nature is not a forgotten constituent in decision making.

New Mexico Wild is a partner in the international *Freshwater Challenge*, an initiative designed to connect the work of grassroots organizations with national plans to address at-risk rivers and wetlands. A key goal of the *Challenge* is to increase the overall investment into the restoration and conservation of freshwater ecosystems and substantially improve the social and economic returns on those investments.



Five strategies to help protect our water future in New Mexico.

Most of the watersheds in our state originate in our Wilderness areas where strong protections exist. However, as streamflows move out of those areas, they lose nearly all protections. Changes in the federal Clean Water Act in the past few years have exacerbated that problem.

With our experience forming powerful coalitions among indigenous voices, traditional communities, and conservation partners, New Mexico Wild is in a strong position to do more in how we prioritize and manage our water resources in the face of climate change.



Each year the national conservation organization *American Rivers* releases a list of the ten most endangered rivers in the country. In 2024, first on that list were ALL of the rivers in New Mexico.

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RIVERS OF NEW MEXICO

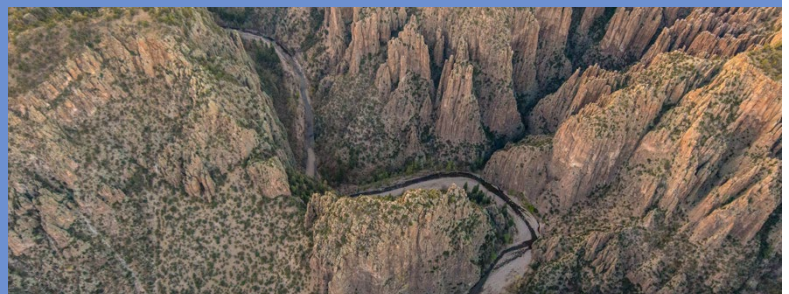
THREAT: Loss of federal stream and wetland protections

STATES: New Mexico

AT RISK: Clean water, wildlife habitat, recreation, agriculture, cultural resources

AMERICA'S MOST ENDANGERED RIVERS®

AMERICAN RIVERS
Life Depends on Rivers

The graphic features a background image of a river winding through a deep, rocky canyon. A small rainbow is visible in the sky above the canyon. The text is overlaid on the image in white and yellow boxes.

Advocating for water for nature.

Not much is more complicated than water law in our state which makes understanding the gravity of aridification and possible adaptations difficult for policymakers and the public at large. With tools such as surface water permitting, strategic water reserves, and long-range water plans, we believe a unique opportunity exists in the coming several years to advocate for a 21st century water policy in New Mexico that puts permanent, substantive protections in place for watersheds, wetlands, rivers, and streams. While it takes grassroots organizing to build support for water policy changes, we also leverage our influence by working with national and international coalitions such as the *Freshwater Challenge*.



At least 80% of all wildlife in New Mexico depend on streams and rivers for water, food, shelter, or nesting at some point in their lifecycle.

Funding opportunities

Water Champions. Establish a small group of donors to act as an informal sounding board to our staff on state water policy and management issues. Suggested contribution of \$25,000 per member.

River Protection Fund. Provide a three-year commitment of \$50,000 per year to support staffing and research costs focused exclusively on river protection in New Mexico.

River & riparian research. New Mexico Wild would like to invest as much as \$150,000 to build out research on our watersheds as a companion to the recent land study developed by EcoAdapt.

General river support. We benefit from the flexibility of funding that is broadly designated to our river work at any investment level.

Creating greater river protections.

The gold standard for river protection is the federal Wild & Scenic Rivers Act and for years New Mexico Wild has worked to expand that designation to more miles of the Gila River and tributaries. It literally takes an act of Congress to make that happen. However, there are other ways to protect rivers that can be accomplished at the state level including the Outstanding National Resource Waters designation. We also believe that new protections could be developed at the state level which don't exist today and could raise the levels of protection in the future.



New Mexico has 108,014 miles of rivers, of which only 124.3 miles are protected by the federal Wild & Scenic designation. This represents only 0.1% of our rivers.

Funding opportunities

Watershed restoration.

Perhaps the most important tactic to protect our rivers and waters is the restoration of primary watersheds in our state. We believe that an investment of \$250,000 over the next two years will allow us to staff this vital work.

The Legal Fund for Water.

Changes are needed to reform water policy in New Mexico and that reform requires proactive work by our legal team and supplemental legal professionals. We want to establish a \$150,000 fund for this important effort.

Beaver recovery

With a contribution of \$35,000, New Mexico Wild will train Citizen Scientists to monitor beaver activity within our public lands to help prioritize restoration.

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Fighting threats to our rivers.

One of the primary roles of New Mexico Wild is to act as a watchdog on policy or rule changes by agencies and inadequate planning and oversight by land managers affecting our public lands and waters. Whether it is illegal cattle grazing that damages sensitive riparian areas, pesticide use near rivers, or proposed mineral mining that can harm water quality, threats to our rivers never stop. For example, we are leading an on-going fight to stop exploratory mining on public lands near the Pecos Wilderness and Pecos River. Each year we see old threats returning and new threats emerging.



New Mexico Wild has substantial “boots on the ground” with our Wilderness Ranger and Wilderness Defender programs. Combined with support from our partners, we can focus more of this valuable resource on river health.

Funding opportunities

River Rangers. We want to expand our successful Wilderness Ranger program to include a team focused on key rivers under threat. We can kick off that effort with \$200,000 start-up funding.

Action Fund for River Defense. Serious river threats often emerge quickly, such as pesticide spraying and mineral drilling. We seek to establish a special reserve Action Fund of \$75,000 to allow us to move quickly against such threats.

Water policy agenda. In advance of outreach to new federal and state officials, we seek to prepare a policy research and environmental flows report including recommendations from the Rio Grande New Mexico Basin Study. Estimated cost to develop would be \$100,000.

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Engaging communities in river protection.

New Mexico Wild believes that an important part of all water solutions is the engagement of key stakeholders and many of those will be non-traditional allies. Whether it is a farmer concerned about water in the acequia or an urbanite concerned about the cost of water at their home, we can build on New Mexican's existing support for clean water and resilient watersheds.

We have recently increased efforts to work with tribal and traditional Hispano communities so that more voices are part of the discussion about how we protect our waters. To increase the community awareness of our rivers, we are developing a "Wild Waters" river guide as a companion to our "Wild Guide" to Wilderness areas.



New Mexico Wild has added a number of locally-based community organizers who offer community events and volunteer activities. Last year alone, 2,113 adults and 876 youth volunteered for community activities sponsored by our organization.

Funding opportunities

People & rivers grants.

New Mexico Wild believes that deepening partnerships with smaller, grassroots organizations and communities can help achieve the greatest river protection. We envision this fund of \$100,000 providing small grants over five years for activities such as river clean-ups, recreation improvements, and citizen science projects.

Public education and outreach.

Many of the waters we want to protect are on public lands in rural areas of the state. We need to invest in communications and outreach in these communities with the goals of uplifting voices of Tribal members and acequia partners, including their ideas in decision making, and creating channels for constructive conversations about river policies and practices. We hope to invest \$25,000 a year in this work.

Mitigating the impact of climate change.

Climate scientists tell us that our state will have 25% less water to meet the needs of both people and nature over the coming two decades. In many ways, climate change shows up first in our lakes, rivers, and wetlands, and often the most vulnerable is wildlife that depend on freshwater sources.

We recently completed a study of key public lands and how climate change will impact these sensitive areas. Now we must translate that research into action both at the grassroots and grass tops level.



“New Mexico’s climate is getting hotter and drier, driven by regional and global warming trends. This means earlier springs, hotter summers, and less predictable winters. Precipitation patterns are also changing, with more intense droughts and a greater proportion of precipitation falling as rain rather than snow.” *Union of Concerned Scientists*

Funding opportunities

Climate fund. New Mexico Wild seeks a donor who will support a Climate Fund of at least \$400,000 that will allow us to act on climate mitigation and resiliency strategies supporting our streams, rivers, lakes, and wetlands.

Statewide ecological assessment. As our climate warms, many species that depend on rivers face daunting risks. Assembling data from many sources that can inform policy decisions can help assure we work where it will have the greatest impact and support the Strategic Water Reserve. We anticipate that this audit would require a \$45,000 investment.

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New Mexico Wild

The New Mexico Wilderness Alliance (New Mexico Wild) is a non-profit 501c(3) grassroots membership organization dedicated to the protection, restoration, and continued enjoyment of New Mexico's wildlands and waters.

Founded in 1997, we achieve our mission through administrative protection, federal wilderness designation, and ongoing stewardship. We have a membership of individuals from all corners of New Mexico and across the nation.

Our organizing efforts span the state and involve many diverse groups, including landowners, sportsmen, land grants, acequia communities, tribal and religious leaders, scientists, youth, and community leaders.

We have a proven track record of building diverse coalitions to protect our public lands and waters and leading successful campaigns that have been called "national models."

Our New Mexico Rivers & Waters Campaign builds on our past work at a scale to meet the challenge we now face. Your support of the campaign will be appreciated by New Mexicans today and our grandchildren tomorrow.

For more information, contact:

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