

RIO GRANDE WATER FUND ANNUAL REPORT

2024



The Nature
Conservancy 
Protecting nature. Preserving life.

RIO GRANDE
WATER FUND
A Wildfire and Water Source
Protection Project

A MESSAGE FROM TNC

During the 2024 field season, the Rio Grande Water Fund (RGWF) completed 7,007 acres of forest restoration and wildfire risk reduction treatments. In addition to our implementation work on the ground, the RGWF achieved several big wins that set us up for even more impact in the years ahead:

- **PARTNERSHIP**—A partnership with the Bureau of Reclamation to secure funding for a comprehensive fire risk mitigation plan;
- **FUNDING**—Working with Colorado State Forest Service to bring \$9.8M of federal money for forest restoration treatments in the San Juan Chama Project source areas;
- **INCREASED CAPACITY**—Collaboration with the U.S. Forest Service to bring \$1.3M to build the capacity of the All Hands All Lands burn team to enable safe controlled burning; and
- **VISIONING**—Consulting with TNC's Nature for Water (N4W) Facility to evaluate and evolve the RGWF for our second decade of operations.

The following report breaks down the 2024 accomplishments according to the new RGWF Program Strategic Pillars, an outcome of N4W recommendations.

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Photo and Cover by: AJ Jones

This report provides details of accomplishments in 2024 and is structured around these five RGWF Strategic Pillars.



COORDINATE COLLECTIVE ACTION

Bring together public and private stakeholders.



IMPLEMENT

Manage implementation of high-impact projects.



INFLUENCE

Influence policy and decision-makers.



STRATEGIC ANALYSIS

Drive evidence-based strategic priorities.



INSPIRE INVESTMENT

Unlock innovative and long-term investment opportunities.



“The excellent work of N4W has helped us to distill our efforts into these Strategic Pillars and this synthesis of our activities will help to focus our work for the next decade.”

*~ Jason Scullion,
Forest Strategy
Director, TNC New
Mexico*



Nature for Water Facility's decadal review of the RGWF has renewed our focus on working collectively to conduct strategic analysis to identify and implement treatments in priority locations with the highest return on investment, inspire investment, and influence policy to enable this work at scale.

These five key pathways for program management are necessary to achieve the RGWF's collective vision for the Rio Grande Watershed. In the coming year, the governance and structure of the RGWF will evolve to better support these five strategic pillars.

Photo by: AJ Jones





Photo by: Steve Bassett

The scale of the wildfire risk in the Rio Grande Watershed is enormous, and no single entity will be able to mitigate it.

Coordinating collective action to address the scale of source water protection for the Rio Grande Watershed and its inhabitants is a core pillar of the RGWF.

Partnerships are essential among water users, water utilities, and landowners; public and private land managers, environmental non-profits, and industry businesses; and conservation districts and federal, state and local offices. Supporting this collective action is necessary to achieve landscape scale impact, bolstering the abilities and strengths of each partner.

The RGWF has successfully supported the development of collective action through programs like the All Hands All Lands burn team and place-based collaboratives like the Santa Fe Fireshed and Taos Valley Watershed Coalition. Current coordination of collective action is focused on sustaining momentum—recognizing a need to coordinate between multiple funders, landowners, and implementers to focus and shape on the ground investments to ensure the greatest landscape-scale impact possible.

The development of the Wildfire Crisis Strategy Enchanted Circle Landscape and Rio Chama Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Project (CFLRP) were both a partial result of the RGWF. This is the path forward for effective landscape scaling and we are focused on providing the strategic analysis and investment for the greatest impact.

The RGWF is also active in the statewide Forest and Watershed Health Coordinating Group, and regularly coordinates with the NM State Forester, US Forest Service regional office, and staff from each organization distributed across the watershed.



“Collaborations are a powerful way to address large-scale work and shared interests, and we are proud to lead such efforts of coordination through the Rio Grande Water Fund.”

~ AJ Jones, Forest & Watershed Health Manager, TNC NM



The Rio Grande Water Fund is focused on implementing forest restoration treatments in the highest return on investment locations.

A recent risk assessment indicates the San Juan Chama Project (SJCP) gives the highest return for treatment locations in water source protection. The SJCP provides over 75 percent of Albuquerque's drinking water and over half of Santa Fe's. Investments in protecting these watersheds have 32 times the return over average within the RGWF footprint.

About 15,000 acres were identified as priority treatment areas to be restored urgently in the SJCP source watersheds to mitigate the threat of future fire. Since the RGWF began, \$1.58M has been directed to these watersheds, restoring 1,954 acres. In 2024, RGWF funding was used for 241 acres of thinning and mastication in the SJCP source watersheds.

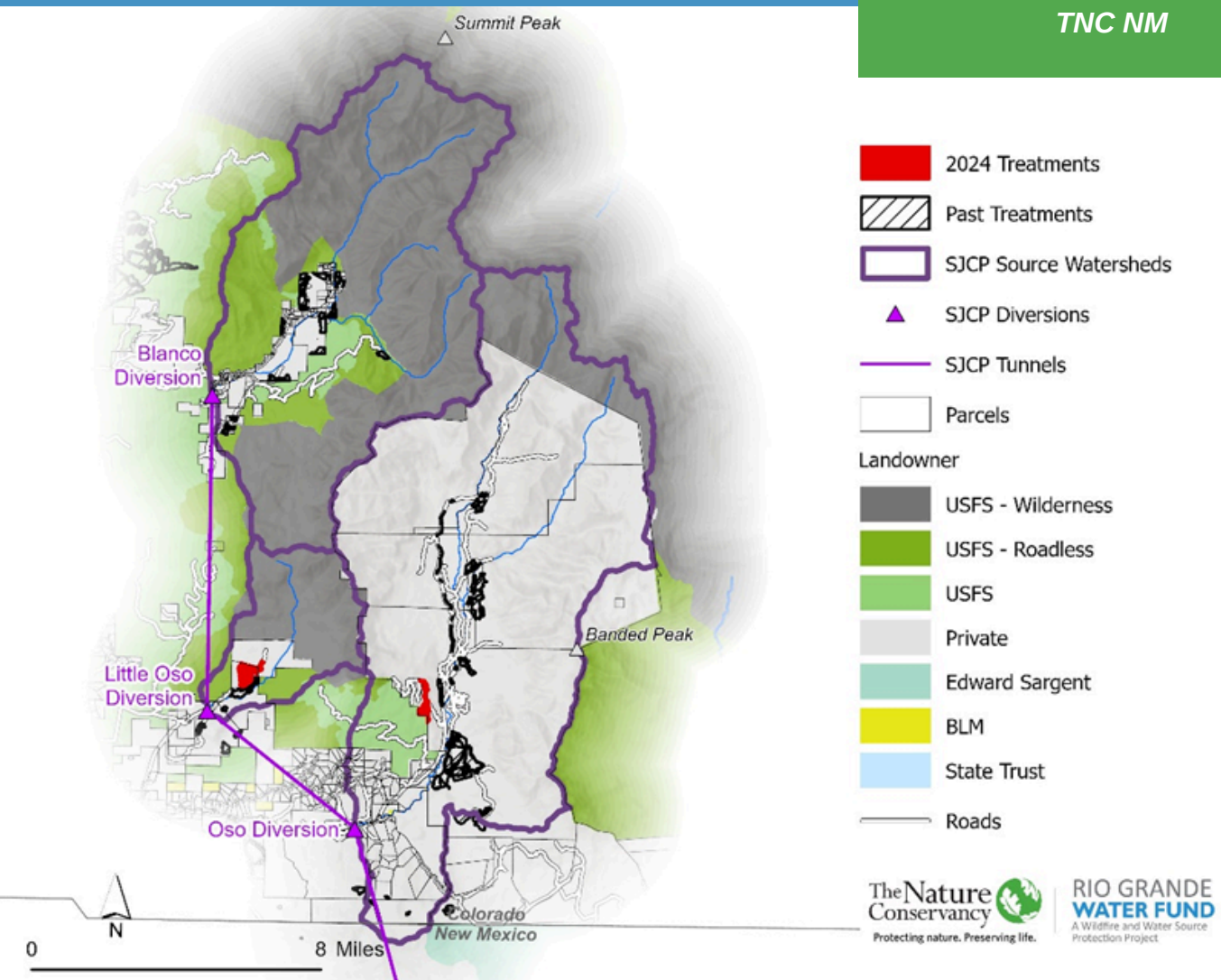


Addressing wildfire risk at the scale of the problem will require collaborative and collective action—a partnership between water users and land managers, environmentalists and industry—building on the strengths and abilities of each.

~ Steve Bassett, Director of Conservation Programs, TNC NM



IMPLEMENT



Map of treatments implemented during 2024. Cumulative treatments cover 1,954 acres, with 12,800 priority acres remaining to be treated in the San Juan Chama Project source watersheds.

Map credit: Steve Bassett/TNC New Mexico



Photo © Fauha Creative

In 2024, TNC and RGWF also invested in controlled burning coordination and capacity through the All Hands All Lands (AHAL) network in New Mexico. AHAL is a collaborative approach to bring back good fire to millions of acres of federal, state, and tribal lands and support private landowners' use of prescribed fire.

Organized by TNC and Forest Stewards Guild jointly, a wide array of resources of personnel, equipment, and experience are brought together to implement prescribed fire. AHAL also engages the public through stories, multimedia, and opportunities for involvement to raise awareness about the relationship between forest health and regional water security and the need to actively manage our forests with fire.

Through the AHAL burning program and TNC's North America Fire resources, the RGWF supported over 6,700 acres of prescribed fire (Rx) activities in the RGWF footprint, including:



Burn planning and preparations for a 200-acre burn on State Land Office land called Black Lake Rx. Due to weather conditions, 120 acres were successfully burned to meet resource objectives and eliminate hazardous fuels for future burns.



North Joaquin Rx on the Santa Fe National Forest (NF) Jemez Ranger District (RD). The first broadcast Rx there since Hermit's Peak Calf Canyon, successfully rebuilding trust and resiliency in the community.



American Creek Rx, a Carson NF Tres Piedras RD 1,024 acre burn, was critical for the Rio Chama Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Project and the El Rito Landscape Prescribed Fire Project area. Both take a systematic approach to community and watershed resiliency and realign the forests with natural fire regime.



TNC's North America Fire program assisted with Rx activities on 1,350 acres on the Carson NF within the RGWF footprint.

AHAL relies on Pueblo and Tribal partners as a key component of the workforce. Through a variety of MOUs, Indigenous forestry and fire programs add both capacity and knowledge to AHAL. Additionally, AHAL is looking at how to expand training opportunities for Tribal partners and assist with burns on Tribal lands.

The RGWF uses its influence to improve the resilience of regional forests, communities, and water supplies in a variety of ways.

In 2024, RGWF continued its role in support of the cross-boundary 2-3-2 collaborative partnership through two seats on the executive committee. One seat represents TNC New Mexico as a founding member of the 2-3-2 and another is held by TNC NM's Indigenous Partnerships Director, John Waconda, Isleta Pueblo, representing Indigenous communities and perspectives in the region. The 2-3-2 continued its work of coordinating forest health projects and influencing where forest management activities occur. This work includes supporting the Rio Chama CFLR Priority Watersheds Designation and the ongoing efforts of the USFS to reduce wildfire risks and increase water security in the Rio Chama basin.

Another example of RGWF's coordination work is our support in developing New Mexico's state-certified burn program to increase prescribed burning on private lands. This program was introduced in 2023 and is in the final stages of development. RGWF is a member of the steering committee and working hard to ensure the program meets its goal of increasing the safety of Rx activities on private lands by educating and certifying private landowners who want to conduct Rx activities on their lands.

Photo © Fauna Creative



“The Rio Grande runs through Indigenous homelands, and its future must be shaped by the people who have stewarded these waters since time immemorial. Watershed leadership isn’t new to us—it’s inherent.”

***~ Rose Gildersleeve,
Indigenous Partnerships
Manager, TNC NM***



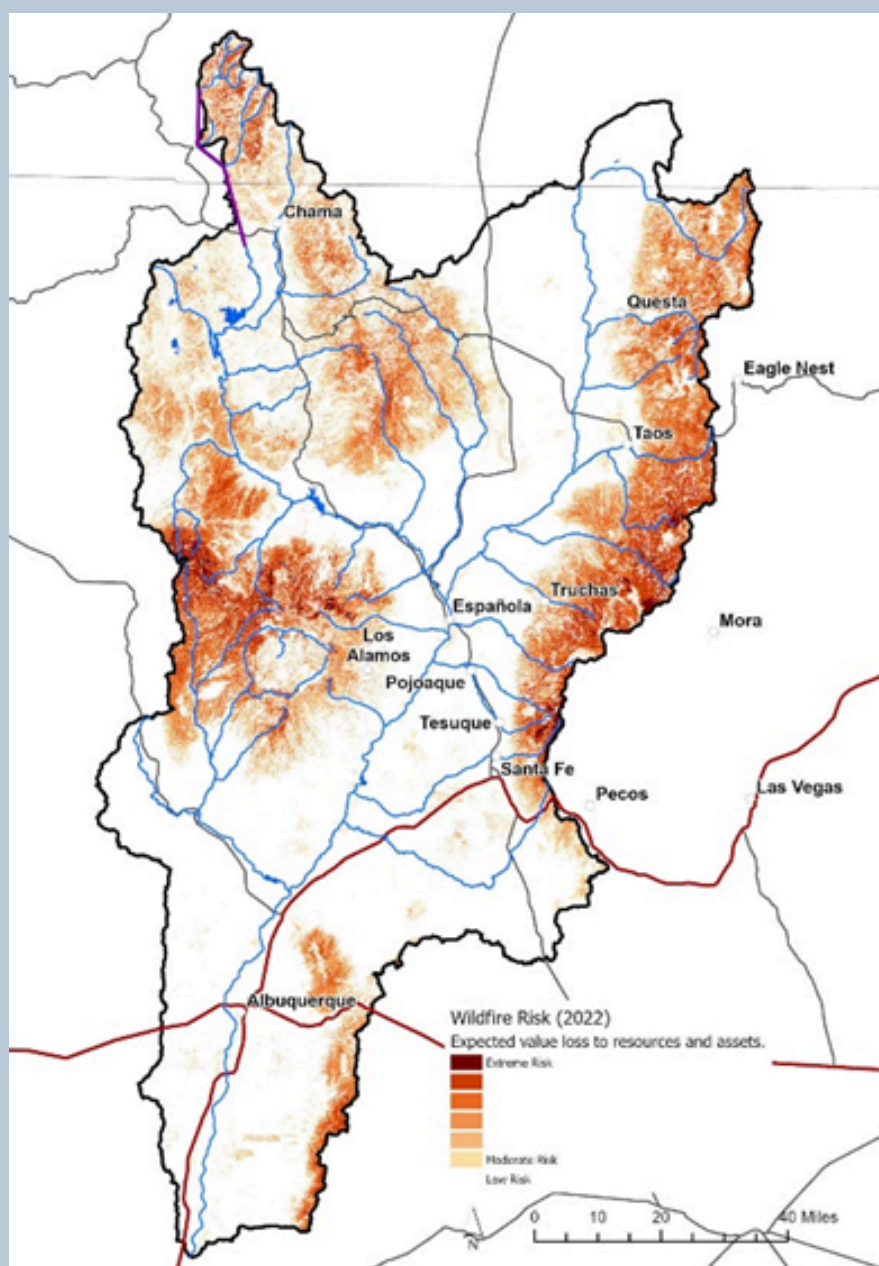
For a decade, RGWF has provided science-based analysis and strategy of forest management activities in the watershed.

This spatial work includes identifying the highest priority areas for forest treatments and quantifying the impacts of ongoing forest management activities. The RGWF has continued its contributions to optimizing forest treatment activities by the RGWF and its partners in several key ways, including producing updated maps of treatment effectiveness and wildfire hazard and risk maps for the RGWF footprint (see figure below).

In the SJCP source watersheds, RGWF is leading a BOR-funded Wildland Fire Management Program planning project to develop pre-fire, fire-response, and post-fire response plans. This planning is being conducted with a wide range of partners, from federal agencies to local landowners. By design, it brings partners together around coordinated efforts for reducing fire risks and responding effectively should a fire occur in the region. The fire-response planning project complements ongoing fire adaptation work in the region, including the renewal of the Community Wildfire Protection Plan for Archuleta County, being led by the Mountain Studies Institute.

Additionally, the RGWF leverages its expertise in geospatial analysis and wildfire hazard mapping to support development of ecosystem service provisioning value maps. These can easily be integrated into quantitative wildfire risk assessments such as the USFS Region 3 Quantitative Wildfire Risk Assessment (QWRA) being developed in 2025. The SJCP source watersheds are the most valuable watersheds to New Mexico. Ensuring these watersheds are accurately represented through prioritization in wildfire planning projects is a priority of the RGWF. This is especially important given the state boundaries and USFS Region Boundaries sever beneficiaries from their water source.

*Wildfire risk to water, resources, and assets. Modeled using FSim.
Map credit: Steve Bassett/TNC NM*



Sustained investments from water users like the Albuquerque Bernalillo County Water Utility Authority (ABCWUA), Middle Rio Grande Conservancy District (MRGCD), New Mexico Watershed and Dam Owners Coalition, General Mills, and Vitality Works have created a strong foundation for the RGWF. Funding from these supporters is leveraged to attract additional investment in this landscape.

Additional investments secured in 2024 include a \$9.8M grant from the Community Wildfire Defense Grant (CWDG) program from the U.S. Forest Service for critical source watersheds of the San Juan-Chama Project trans-basin diversion, including continuing forest treatments on private land.



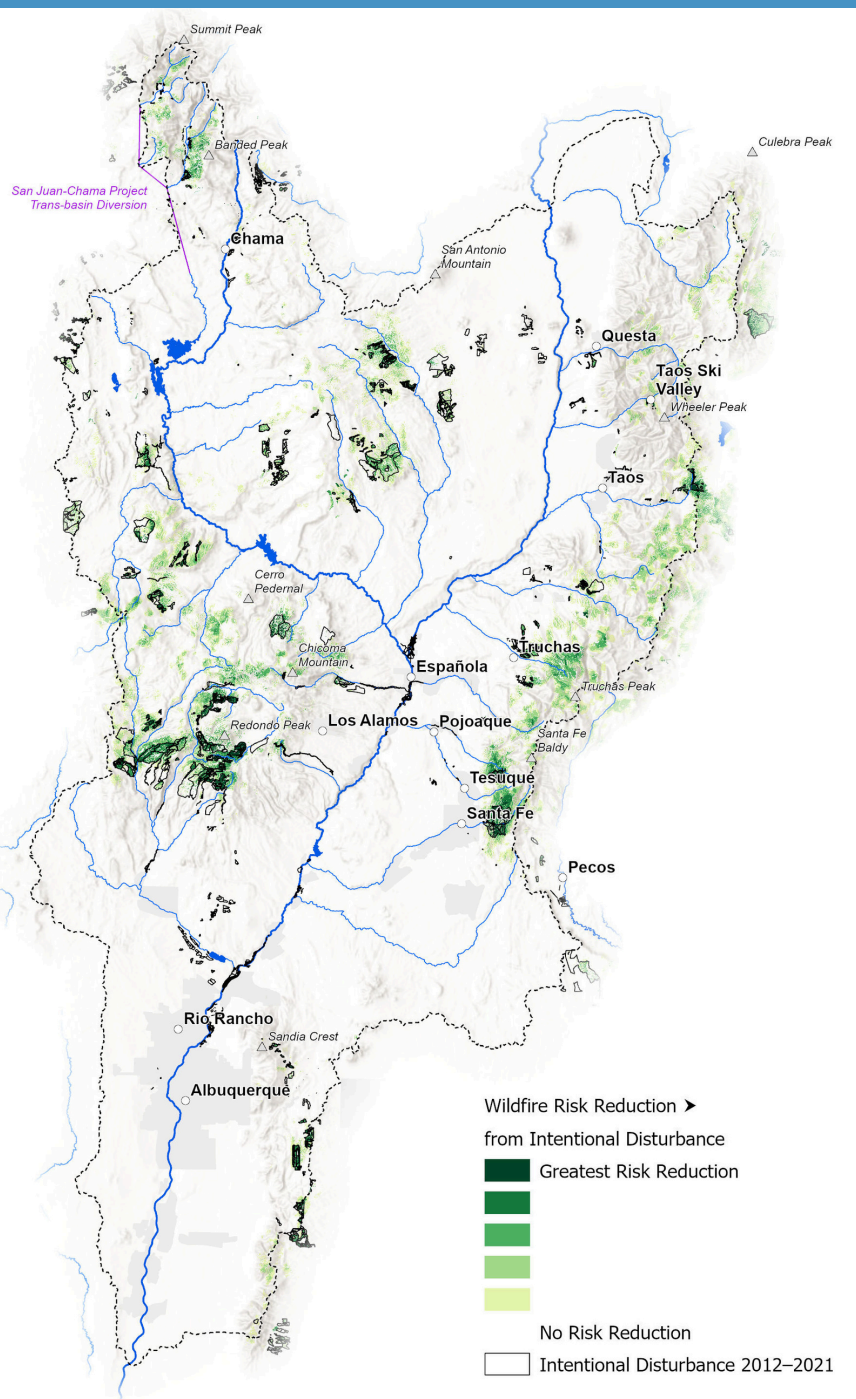
“Irrigation system managers can invest all they want in canal infrastructure, gate automation, and on-farm efficiency, but all of that counts for very little if you aren’t investing in the source of that water. MRGCD recognizes investment in our green infrastructure upstream of our diversions is critical to furthering our mission of providing water to farmers in the Middle Rio Grande.”

~ Casey Ish, Conservation Program Special Projects Manager, MRGCD



Another \$1.36 million was secured from the USFS for a five-year Keystone agreement to support the RGWF in hazardous fuels reduction and vegetation and watershed management. Specifically earmarked for AHAL, the funding will be utilized to add capacity and support fuels reduction and prescribed fire activities in congressionally delegated federal lands in the Wildland Urban Interfaces of the Carson, Cibola, and Santa Fe National Forests.

Other funds secured in 2024 for the RGWF include \$125k secured from the Danaher Corporation for tribal forest and fire work in the RGWF footprint, as well as seven other private foundation gifts.



Forest Restoration

Located near Chama, NM, this juniper removal addressed a severe ladder fuel and site encroachment issue. Through loss of regular interval fire regimes, encroachment began pushing out the pine overstory. Through heavy mastication, all juniper was removed onsite to create a defensible fuel break and fire adapted restoration.

Photo by: Dolecek Enterprises Inc.



Forest Treatment

Located near Chromo, CO, this decadent aspen removal and oak mastication treatment has moved the site towards a climate adapted and fire resilient outcome. The emphasis was placed on retention of pine and Douglas fir with surface fuel reductions and standing dead removals.

Photo by: Dolecek Enterprises Inc.



Ladder Fuel Removal

Located near Chama, NM, this mixed conifer treatment focused on removal of ladder fuels, surface fuels, and canopy reductions to create a fire adapted fuel break. Reductions in white fir and decadent/dead aspen will allow for Ponderosa pine and Douglas fir to dominate the site once again.

Photo by: Dolecek Enterprises Inc.



"There is a fantastic opportunity for restoration and fire resilience treatments in the Rio Grande Watershed which will help facilitate water security to current and future generations."

~ Nicholas Dolecek, Dolecek Enterprises Inc., RGWF Signatory



Our 2024 accomplishments would not be possible without your investment. We are grateful for your continued support as we look forward to the next decade of the Rio Grande Water Fund.

RGWF Executive Committee

- Brian Burnett (Chair), CEO at BGB Consulting
- Dr. Janie Chermak, Professor of Economics, University of New Mexico
- Mark Kelly, Water Resources Division Manager, Albuquerque Bernalillo County Water Utility Authority
- J.R. Logan, Owner of Del Medio Forestry
- Michiko Martin, Regional Forester, Southwest Region, USDA Forest Service
- Laura McCarthy, State Forester, New Mexico Energy, Minerals and Natural Resources Department

We thank you for your continued support of the Rio Grande Water Fund.

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