

REVITALIZING NEW MEXICO'S EXISTING CONSERVATION PROGRAMS (2021 HB265)

Modernizing existing programs would ensure that New Mexico has the ability to expand public access; create new parks and local open spaces; bolster rural outdoor economies; offer voluntary conservation easements for landowners; and restore habitat, water resources, and working lands.



Photo: Villanueva State Park, EMNRD

Together, the Natural Lands Protection Act (NLPA) and the Natural Heritage Conservation Act (NHCA) give New Mexico the necessary tools to protect our natural resources and outdoor way of life.

But... both of these programs contain outdated, narrow provisions that limit their efficacy, making them difficult for EMNRD to utilize. **This leaves the agency unable to fully leverage federal conservation funding**, including up to \$5 million in matching dollars annually from the Land and Water Conservation Fund, in addition to tens of millions of dollars from programs overseen by the United States Department of Agriculture and the Department of Interior that require a state match.

Options for updating NHCA & NLPA include... specifying a shared project fund across the two programs, expanding the composition of the Natural Lands Protection Committee that oversees both programs, and updating project selection priorities to improve habitat connectivity and help the state meet its climate goals – all of which would improve the state's ability to meet criteria for leveraging federal conservation programs.

Unlike many neighboring states with robust outdoor recreation economies, New Mexico lacks a dedicated funding source for state conservation programs that make such tourism sustainable. We promote our precious natural places while lacking adequate resources to protect them. If this legislation passes, and these two programs were funded, the state would have the ability to distribute grants to agencies, various local government entities, nonprofit organizations, land grants, and acequias to match federal funds for acquisition, restoration, conservation, and recreation projects.

History of the NLPA and NHCA

The NLPA has been used since 1988 to protect unique wildlife habitat through projects with state agencies and non-profit land conservation partners. The narrow provisions in this act have meant no organization has been able to utilize it except for The Nature Conservancy, which has participated in 10 important projects between 1988 and 2009, jointly acquiring 4,820 acres (90% state ownership/10% NGO ownership).

We'd like to make NLPA more effective by allowing communities to qualify for grants to create local open spaces and natural areas, and by including greater representation on the committee.

When NHCA passed in 2010, EMNRD received a one-time allocation of approximately \$5 million to complete restoration projects with the idea that NHCA would be the home for future funding, which never materialized. With that \$5 million, 16 conservation easements and restoration projects in 11 counties on private, public, and tribal lands were completed through joint efforts between EMNRD and NGOs.

We'd like to update NHCA project selection priorities for the committee and specify a shared project fund across these two programs for on-the-ground conservation projects that help reach the state's climate and conservation goals.

Why Is This A Short Session Bill?

- This bill passed the House in 2021 as HB265 (Rep. Ortez, Sen. Hamblen), and simply ran out of time to be scheduled in the Senate Judiciary Committee.
- This bill is a smart step that uses existing statute to address sustainable use of New Mexico lands. It doesn't rewrite the purpose of these existing programs, but rather offers technical fixes to modernize the sister NHCA and NLPA programs.
- This bill is in line with President Biden and Interior Secretary Haaland's "America the Beautiful" land and water conservation goals and is an interim step towards completing on-the-ground projects and establish long-term funding for conservation.

This bill does not currently include an appropriation, but we hope EMNRD will request funding for its existing fund via the budget process now that the NLPA committee is fully appointed. **The below organizations have collectively asked the governor to put this bill on the call as the New Mexico Conservation Coalition's top legislative priority for the 2022 session.**

Supporting Organizations:

Conservation Voters New Mexico
New Mexico Wild Action Fund
New Mexico Wildlife Federation
Sierra Club Rio Grande Chapter
Western Resource Advocates
Nuestra Tierra Conservation Project
Amigos Bravos
Gila River Information Project

Hispanics Enjoying Camping, Hunting
& the Outdoors (HECHO)
Audubon Southwest
Trout Unlimited New Mexico Council
Friends of Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks
Western Leaders Network

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