

## **New Mexico Land Grant Consejo: Origins, Activities, and Mission**

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The Consejo was formally established in December 2006 with the adoption of a set of by-laws and with the eventual participation of twenty-eight community land grants in New Mexico (one in Colorado). Its original name, New Mexico Land Grant Council/Consejo was changed in 2008 after the establishment of the New Mexico Land Grant Council, a commission-like executive agency administratively attached to the New Mexico Department of Finance and Administration.

The Consejo is an organization of land grants. Member land grant boards of trustees appoint one of their members to represent the land grant at the Consejo's quarterly and annual meetings. The Consejo is an advocacy organization, established for the purpose of advancing the collective interests of community land grants, primarily, but not limited to working with the New Mexico state legislature, executive agencies, U.S. executive agencies especially the U.S. Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management, and the U.S. Congress. In addition to serving as a forum for the exchange of information and mutual assistance among community land grants, it works in partnership with the New Mexico Land Grant Council, the UNM Land Grant Studies Program, the Interim Committee on Land Grants of the New Mexico legislature, members of the New Mexico congressional delegation, and government officials and agencies. It also serves as the parent organization for the Merced Land Education and Conservation Trust (MLECT), a 501(c) 3 organization whose board is appointed by the Consejo.

It was established as a result of the informal gathering of land grant heirs from two dozen land grants during the efforts in the late 1990s and early 2000s to promote federal legislation for the adjudication of unresolved land grant claims, the advocacy work of the MLECT and the Land Grant Forum, and a request by the New Mexico congressional delegation that land grants form an organization to represent their collective interests. After adopting a set of by-laws and formal procedures in 2006 and early 2007, the Consejo met to develop a federal legislative proposal which was concluded in the spring of 2009 and presented to the New Mexico congressional delegation. The response of the delegation was to work on a number of alternatives, including set-aside funds for land grants in the Farm Bill and other provisions of federal legislation. By 2009 the Consejo adopted a new strategy that included working with the newly established New Mexico Land Grant Council, that included advocating for traditional use rights for land grant heirs within the historic common lands or traditional use rights lands of the land grants.

**The Consejo's goals are summarized in the "purpose" clause of its by-laws:**

*The New Mexico Land Grant Consejo was formed in order to promote policies that enable community land grant/mercedes to reacquire, protect and preserve common lands, water rights, autonomy, cultural integrity and traditions within community land grants/mercedes throughout New Mexico and the Southwest. Its mission also includes promoting policies that will provide for social, environmental and economic justice and for community and economic development empowerment for all land grant/merced communities as well as providing for the health, education, safety and general welfare of land grant/merced heirs. Lastly, it has been formed to advocate for the protection and enforcement of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and the Protocol of Querétaro rights at both the state and federal level.*

Clearly, land recovery, preservation of land and water rights, and advancing justice and empowerment for land grant communities are central to the Consejo's mission. Since 2008, two land grants (Abiquiú and the Town of Tomé) have recovered small parcels with the assistance and support of state agencies and Valencia County, the Interim Committee on Land Grants, the Consejo, and other partners. Current priorities of the Consejo are focused on getting federal legislation introduced to secure traditional use rights for heirs within the historic or traditional use boundaries of community land grants, legislation to return a cemetery belonging to San Joaquín del Río de Chama currently within a wilderness area to the land grant, and land grant set-asides in the Farm Bill.

**Longer-term priorities include:**

- Recovery of former common lands
- Land grants to be given priority for disposal of public lands that are former common lands.
- Payment in Lieu of Taxes for common lands now managed by the federal government.
- Land grant board of trustees and heirs be given priority in Federal leases on former common lands under Federal management.
- Establishing a commission to evaluate individual community land grant claims and make restitution recommendations to Congress
- Legislative repeal of *United States v Sandoval* 167 US.278 (1897)
- Taking action on unadjudicated or unjustly adjudicated land grants
- Federal recognition of priority and pre-existing water rights, mineral and other natural resource rights existing and former common lands
- Establishing a funded endowment for land grants in order to support:
  - Land Recovery
  - Natural resources and forest and watershed health restoration
  - Community development including affordable housing, water and wastewater infrastructure, roads, mortgage lending.
  - Economic development- including job creation, low-interest loans for heirs, business acquisition and start up, renewable energy projects.
  - Education – including scholarships
  - Cultural preservation – including protection and restoration of sacred and historical sites.
  - Operating funds for land grants