

MINUTES
of the
FOURTH MEETING
of the
WATER AND NATURAL RESOURCES COMMITTEE

September 28-30, 2026
Don Fernando Hall
Taos Civic Center
120 Civic Plaza Drive
Taos

The fourth meeting of the Water and Natural Resources Committee was called to order by Representative Kristina Ortiz, chair, at 9:35 a.m. on Monday, September 28, 2026, in the Don Fernando Hall of the Taos Civic Center in Taos.

Present

Rep. Kristina Ortiz, Chair
Sen. Elizabeth "Liz" Stefanics, Vice Chair
Rep. Micaela Lara Cadena (9/28)
Sen. Pete Campos
Sen. Joseph Cervantes
Sen. Candy Spence Ezzell
Rep. Martha Garcia*
Rep. Jonathan A. Henry
Rep. D. Wonda Johnson (9/29)
Rep. Randall T. Pettigrew
Rep. Angelica Rubio
Rep. Debra M. Sariñana

Advisory Members

Sen. Angel M. Charley (9/29, 9/30)
Rep. Jack Chatfield
Rep. Tara L. Lujan (9/28, 9/29)
Rep. Angelita Mejia
Rep. Andrea Romero
Rep. Patricia Roybal Caballero
Sen. Anthony L. Thornton
Sen. Pat Woods

Absent

Rep. Kathleen Cates
Rep. Miguel P. García
Rep. Joseph Franklin Hernandez
Rep. Marian Matthews
Rep. Matthew McQueen
Sen. Micaelita Debbie O'Malley
Sen. Larry R. Scott
Rep. Elaine Sena Cortez
Sen. Jeff Steinborn
Sen. James G. Townsend

Rep. Gail Armstrong
Sen. Craig W. Brandt
Rep. Eleanor Chávez
Rep. Nicole Chavez
Rep. Meredith A. Dixon
Rep. Charlotte Little
Sen. Linda M. López
Rep. Stefani Lord
Sen. Antonio Maestas
Rep. Javier Martínez
Rep. Tanya Mirabal Moya

Rep. Rod Montoya
Rep. Mark B. Murphy
Sen. Antoinette Sedillo Lopez
Rep. Nathan P. Small
Sen. Mimi Stewart
Rep. Harlan Vincent
Sen. Peter Wirth
Rep. Martin R. Zamora

Guest Legislator

Sen. Roberto "Bobby" J. Gonzales (9/30)

*Appointed by the speaker of the house of representatives or the president pro tempore of the senate as a voting member for this meeting only.

(Attendance dates are noted for those members not present for the entire meeting.)

Staff

Sara Wiedmaier, Researcher, Legislative Council Service (LCS)
Em Green, Staff Attorney, LCS
Angela Dakan, Staff, LCS

Guests

The guest list is in the meeting file.

Handouts

Handouts and other written testimony are in the meeting file and posted on the legislature's website.

References to Webcast

The time reference noted next to each agenda item in this document is cross-referenced to the recorded webcast of the committee meeting, which can be found at www.nmlegis.gov, under the "Webcast" tab. The presentations made and committee discussions for agenda items can be found on the recorded webcast for this meeting.

Monday, September 28**Welcome and Introductions (9:35 a.m.)**

Representative Ortiz welcomed everyone, and committee members introduced themselves.

Welcome and Local Updates (9:40 a.m.)

Daniel Barrone, mayor, Town of Taos, welcomed the committee and discussed local attractions, community development projects and joint town-county initiatives, including a new recycling facility.

Regenerative Agriculture Practices, Soil Health and the Agricultural Water Resilience Program (AgWRP) (9:51 a.m.)

Kris Hulvey, Ph.D., founder and lead scientist, Working Lands Conservation, discussed how regenerative agriculture can improve soil health, water retention and rangeland conditions in semi-arid environments and highlighted virtual fencing technology to better manage livestock grazing and support ecosystem health. Jim Armendariz, rancher and farmer, Rancho Armendariz, described how improved grazing management boosted his small cattle operation into a larger enterprise by reducing bare ground and gave a demonstration on how soils with living roots absorb rainfall more effectively. Debbie Hughes, executive director, New Mexico Association of Conservation Districts, discussed the AgWRP's support for conservation initiatives and emphasized the need for continued investment in watershed and habitat restoration and improved administrative processes for local conservation districts. Kirsten Holles, manager, AgWRP, Water Resources Research Institute (WRI), New Mexico State University (NMSU), reported strong statewide demand for the AgWRP, which supports projects to help farmers and ranchers make more effective use of limited water resources. Ahmed Mashaly, Ph.D., research scientist, AgWRP, WRI, NMSU, outlined efforts to measure the impacts of AgWRP projects, noting expected water savings and benefits to farmers and ranchers. Jon Hupp, owner, Goat Orchard Farms, described how an AgWRP grant could help expand his orchard while reducing water consumption through monitoring, reuse of irrigation runoff and incorporating fertigation. The presentation materials can be found here:

<https://www.nmlegis.gov/Committee/Handouts?CommitteeCode=WNR&Date=9/28/2026&ItemNumber=2>.

Circular Economy Plan and Composting and Recycling Initiatives (11:44 a.m.)

Shirlene Sitton, chief, Resource Recovery Bureau, Department of Environment (NMED), provided an update on implementation of House Bill 291 (2025), including development of the state's first Circular Economy Plan and expanded efforts to improve recycling, waste diversion and management of major waste streams. Sarah Pierpont, executive director, New Mexico Recycling Coalition, discussed strategies for advancing a circular economy, emphasizing extended producer responsibility, successful waste-reduction initiatives and investments in grants, education and market development. Robb Hirsch, co-founder, New Mexico Healthy Soil Working Group, advocated for expanding composting through education, incentives and sustained funding, citing benefits for soil health, water conservation, waste and emissions

reductions, agriculture and economic development. The presentation materials can be found here:

<https://www.nmlegis.gov/Committee/Handouts?CommitteeCode=WNR&Date=9/28/2026&ItemNumber=3>.

Public Comment (1:08 p.m.)

A list of individuals who made public comment is available in the meeting file.

Strategic Water Reserve Updates (1:32 p.m.)

Hannah Riseley-White, director, Interstate Stream Commission, and Anjali Bean, senior policy analyst, Healthy Rivers, Western Resource Advocates, discussed the Strategic Water Reserve's role in protecting streamflows and supporting water management, highlighting recent funding, staffing and policy improvements, water-right acquisitions and the need for sustained investment and partnerships to address long-term water issues. The presentation materials can be found here:

<https://www.nmlegis.gov/Committee/Handouts?CommitteeCode=WNR&Date=9/28/2026&ItemNumber=4>.

River Stewardship Program Updates and River Protection, Health and Economic Impacts (2:39 p.m.)

Kate Lacey-Younge, watershed protection section program manager, NMED, provided an update on the River Stewardship Program, which supports watershed restoration and infrastructure initiatives through grants and technical assistance, including expansion of funding opportunities, program accomplishments and challenges and future funding requests. Shannon Romeling, projects coordinator, Amigos Bravos, discussed River Stewardship Program projects that are restoring wetland sites, creating jobs and improving water quality, ground water recharge, wildlife habitat and drought resilience and advocated for continued program funding. Cisco Guevara, founder, president and head guide, Los Rios River Runners, discussed the severe impacts of historically low Rio Grande flows on rafting businesses and local economies and advocated for policies that maintain minimum river flows and protect the river's environmental, cultural, recreational and economic value. Tricia Snyder, director, Rivers and Waters Program, New Mexico Wild, outlined a proposed 2027 river protection bill that would designate river segments, establish a funding program for conservation and monitoring efforts and promote a more holistic approach to river management amid growing water challenges. The presentation materials can be found here:

<https://www.nmlegis.gov/Committee/Handouts?CommitteeCode=WNR&Date=9/28/2026&ItemNumber=5>.

Nature-Based Solutions (3:38 p.m.)

Sarah Hurteau, director, Resilient Cities Program, Spatial Informatics Group-Natural Assets Laboratory, discussed the role of nature-based solutions in addressing water, wildfire and climate resilience challenges, highlighting opportunities to improve funding, procurement, workforce development and agency coordination to expand the use of conservation and restoration practices statewide. The presentation materials can be found here:

<https://www.nmlegis.gov/Committee/Handouts?CommitteeCode=WNR&Date=9/28/2026&ItemNumber=6>.

Recess and Tour of Red River Restoration Site and Red River Hatchery

The meeting recessed at 4:24 p.m. for a tour of a restored section of the Red River in Questa impacted by historic mining and channelization. The tour also included the Red River Fish Hatchery, which supports trout production, sport fishing and public education in the state.

Tuesday, September 29**Wildfire Mitigation, Forest and Watershed Restoration and the Rio Grande Water Fund (9:11 a.m.)**

Lindsey Quam, deputy director, Forestry Division, Energy, Minerals and Natural Resources Department (EMNRD), discussed efforts to reduce wildfire risk through forest thinning, workforce development and enhanced firefighting capacity, noting ongoing challenges from drought, tree mortality and limited forest industry infrastructure. Steve Bassett, director, Conservation Programs, The Nature Conservancy, highlighted the Rio Grande Water Fund's efforts to reduce wildfire risk and protect water supplies through strategic forest restoration and emphasized the importance of continued collaboration and funding. Kyle Harwood, attorney and administrator, San Juan Chama Project Contractors Association, discussed the San Juan-Chama Project's role in supporting municipal water supplies, irrigation, tribal water settlements and ground water management and highlighted efforts to modernize infrastructure, coordinate water users and protect source watersheds from wildfire. J.R. Logan, owner, Del Medio Forestry, LLC, discussed collaborative efforts among local, state, federal and tribal partners on forest restoration projects and stated the need for wood-product markets to support the volume of material generated by forest thinning. The presentation materials can be found here:

<https://www.nmlegis.gov/Committee/Handouts?CommitteeCode=WNR&Date=9/28/2026&ItemNumber=7>.

Land Grant-Merced Forest Co-Management and Opportunities for Value-Added Economic Development (11:11 a.m.)

Juan P. Lopez, president, Board of Trustees, Santo Tomas Apostol del Rio de las Trampas Land Grant-Merced; Mr. Logan; and James Duran, supervisor, Carson National Forest, United States Forest Service, discussed a collaborative community-based forest restoration initiative focused on wildfire mitigation, watershed protection and workforce and wood-products development, suggesting the initiative's potential as a model for supporting rural economic development and long-term forest resilience. The presentation materials can be found here:

<https://www.nmlegis.gov/Committee/Handouts?CommitteeCode=WNR&Date=9/28/2026&ItemNumber=8>.

Wildfire Mitigation Plans and Utility Liability (11:51 a.m.)

Jay Sturhahn, senior vice president and general counsel, Tri-State Generation and Transmission Association, Inc., spoke in support of the proposed Wildfire Mitigation and Liability Act (WMLA), saying it would encourage utilities to reduce wildfire risk through approved mitigation plans while limiting liability for utilities that follow those plans. Wes Gray, P.E., vice president, Operations and Engineering, Public Service Company of New Mexico (PNM), discussed PNM's wildfire mitigation efforts, including risk modeling, vegetation management, grid hardening, weather monitoring and coordination with emergency responders and expressed support for the WMLA. McLee Kerolle, technical advisor, Public Regulation Commission (PRC), discussed the PRC's approach to wildfire oversight through workshops, stakeholder engagement and utility reviews and said that additional funding for staff and technical resources would help effectively evaluate and oversee utility wildfire plans. Elizabeth Johnson, associate general counsel and legislative liaison, Office of Superintendent of Insurance (OSI), stated that the OSI supports mitigation efforts based on national standards and regular inspections. The presentation materials can be found here:

<https://www.nmlegis.gov/Committee/Handouts?CommitteeCode=WNR&Date=9/28/2026&ItemNumber=9>.

Noxious Weeds Program and Funding Updates (1:34 p.m.)

Max Henkels, director, Agricultural Programs and Resources Division, New Mexico Department of Agriculture (NMDA), outlined the state's noxious weed management program, highlighting recent funding that has expanded mapping, coordination and grant programs to support local efforts to prevent and control invasive species. Tyler Zander, manager, Healthy Soils and Noxious Weed Program, Taos Soil and Water Conservation District, described how state grant funding is helping landowners remove invasive trees from agricultural lands through mapping, mechanical removal, targeted grazing and follow-up treatments to restore farmland and riparian

areas. Larry Mondragon, landowner, Ranchos de Taos, thanked the legislature and local conservation partners for funding invasive species control efforts that helped restore his land that had become unusable for grazing and farming. The presentation materials can be found here:

<https://www.nmlegis.gov/Committee/Handouts?CommitteeCode=WNR&Date=9/28/2026&ItemNumber=10>.

Uranium Mining Proposals and Permitting Process (2:19 p.m.)

Jonas Armstrong, director, Water Protection Division, NMED, outlined the state's uranium mine permitting process, which emphasizes ground water protection, environmental review, public participation and financial assurance requirements, and noted that the NMED is legally required to evaluate permit applications under existing laws and regulations. David "D.J." Ennis, P.G., program manager, New Mexico Mining Act Reclamation Program, EMNRD, described the state's mining permitting framework, which includes environmental review, agency and tribal consultation, reclamation planning and financial assurance requirements, noting that federal mining law limits the ability to deny valid mining claims. Buster Green, commissioner, District 1, Catron County Board of Commissioners, expressed concerns about a proposed uranium exploration project in Catron County and urged regulators to require a more extensive review process with better community engagement and environmental analysis. Laura Watchempino, member, Laguna-Acoma Coalition for a Safe Environment, discussed the long-term impacts of historical uranium mining in the Grants Mining District and argued that regulators need more resources to evaluate cumulative impacts; protect water supplies, public health and cultural landscapes; and ensure that mining companies can reclaim affected ground water before new projects move forward. Misael Cabrera, senior vice president of sustainability and regulatory affairs, Energy Fuels Inc., and Nick Martin, environmental manager, Energy Fuels Inc./Roca Honda Mine, discussed the proposed Roca Honda uranium mine and stated that modern regulations, environmental oversight and financial assurance requirements can prevent the problems associated with historical uranium mining. The presentation materials can be found here:

<https://www.nmlegis.gov/Committee/Handouts?CommitteeCode=WNR&Date=9/28/2026&ItemNumber=11>.

Approval of Minutes (4:54 p.m.)

On a motion duly made and seconded, the minutes of the August 31-September 1, 2026 meeting were approved without changes.

Free-Roaming Horse Herd Management and Funding for Equine Shelters (4:55 p.m.)

Nina Eydelman, chief program and policy officer, Equine and Wildlife, Animal Protection New Mexico and Animal Protection Voters, presented two legislative proposals intended to strengthen and stabilize funding for the Equine Shelter Rescue

Fund and to establish a framework for managing free-roaming horse populations through humane methods, including fertility control, targeted removals and oversight by qualified horse management experts. Susan Hemmerle, executive director, The Horse Shelter, highlighted the role licensed equine rescues play in caring for neglected, abused and surrendered horses on behalf of the state and supported increased funding for the Equine Shelter Rescue Fund to help meet growing demand. Karen Herman, Ph.D., director, Sky Mountain Wild Horse Sanctuary, advocated for humane management of free-roaming horse populations through herd planning, fertility control and a framework that protects animal welfare, public safety and rangeland health. Belinda Garland, executive director, New Mexico Livestock Board, expressed support for transferring administration of the Equine Shelter Rescue Fund to the NMDA and efforts to improve free-roaming horse management. The presentation materials can be found here:

<https://www.nmlegis.gov/Committee/Handouts?CommitteeCode=WNR&Date=9/28/2026&ItemNumber=12>.

Public Comment (5:33 p.m.)

A list of individuals who made public comment is available in the meeting file.

Recess

The meeting recessed at 5:59 p.m.

Wednesday, September 30

Renewable Energy Siting for Wildlife and Ecosystems (9:06 a.m.)

Stephanie Herbert, deputy director of stewardship, State Land Office, discussed natural resource protection standards for wind and solar projects on state trust lands that support renewable energy development and minimize environmental impacts. Michael B. Sloane, director, Department of Wildlife (NMDOW), described the NMDOW's role in providing guidance for renewable energy projects and noted collaborative efforts to improve siting practices and research the effects of utility-scale solar development on wildlife and habitat connectivity. Michael Dax, Wildlands Network, presented research on the effects of utility-scale solar development on pronghorn movement and stressed the need for early wildlife agency involvement and measures to minimize impacts on wildlife as renewable energy development expands. Ian Evans, senior manager of environmental permitting, Pattern Energy, discussed Pattern Energy's renewable energy development approach, which includes environmental review, wildlife agency consultation, stakeholder engagement and the minimization of impacts on sensitive habitat and migration corridors. Grady Barrens, director, Renewable Energy Office, SLO, joined during the question-and-answer period to explain that operating renewable

energy projects must provide financial assurance based on an independent estimate of the cost to restore the site. The presentation materials can be found here:

<https://www.nmlegis.gov/Committee/Handouts?CommitteeCode=WNR&Date=9/28/2026&ItemNumber=13>.

Black Bears: Managing Human-Wildlife Conflicts (10:21 a.m.)

Mr. Sloane discussed the NMDOW's management of black bears, including regulated hunting limits and population monitoring and efforts to reduce human-bear conflicts through public education, relocation and, when necessary, euthanasia of habituated bears that pose public safety risks. Jesse Deubel, executive director, New Mexico Wildlife Federation, explained that drought and habitat degradation have increased human-bear conflicts, stressed the importance of preventing access to human food sources, noted the costs associated with managing bears and encouraged the use of regulated hunting as a wildlife management tool to balance bear populations with available habitat. The presentation materials can be found here:

<https://www.nmlegis.gov/Committee/Handouts?CommitteeCode=WNR&Date=9/28/2026&ItemNumber=14>.

Elk Private Land Use System (EPLUS) (10:35 a.m.)

Mr. Sloane explained that the EPLUS program allocates elk hunting authorizations to landowners who provide habitat and resources for elk while helping manage elk populations through private hunting opportunities. Kerrie Romero, executive director, New Mexico Council of Outfitters and Guides, discussed the economic importance of elk hunting, including its role in supporting the NMDOW, generating tourism revenue, sustaining rural economies and providing income to private landowners. Donald Martinez, rancher, and agricultural extension agent, New Mexico Cooperative Extension Service, NMSU, stated that the EPLUS helps offset the costs that elk impose on private landowners and supports agricultural operations, rural communities and hunting traditions. Lance Bernal, natural resources manager and wildlife biologist, Vermejo Park Ranch, described how the EPLUS is used to manage elk populations, support habitat restoration and conservation projects and provide hunting opportunities that benefit communities. Mr. Deubel argued that EPLUS provides disproportionate hunting opportunities to private landowners and wealthy hunters and should be reformed to improve public access and ensure equitable allocation of publicly owned wildlife resources. The presentation materials can be found here:

<https://www.nmlegis.gov/Committee/Handouts?CommitteeCode=WNR&Date=9/28/2026&ItemNumber=15>.

Adjournment

There being no further business before the committee, the meeting adjourned at 11:56 a.m.