



Healthy Rivers Mean a Healthy New Mexico

Acting Now Can Save the State's Economy, Homes, and Birds

In New Mexico, rivers are the ribbons of life for our land, culture, economy, and our way of life. Healthy river ecosystems safeguard water quality, protect the ground-water supply that 90% of New Mexican's use as their primary source of drinking water, reduce fire risk, and provide critical habitat. Healthy river ecosystems are also part of our state's cultural heritage, agricultural economy and a billion dollar per year recreation industry.

The Climate Crisis and New Mexico's Rivers

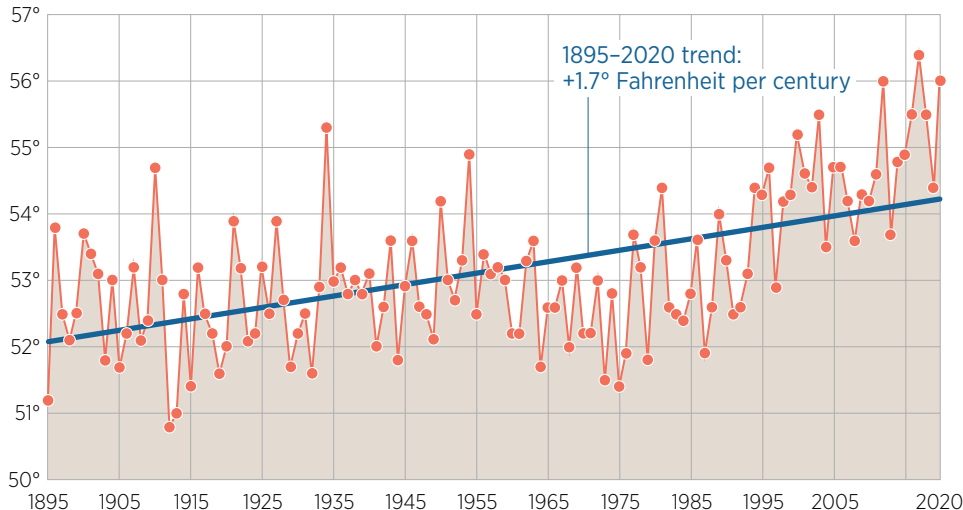
Communities, economies, and natural systems function more efficiently when rivers are clean and ecologically robust. From flood control to groundwater storage to downstream water delivery, healthy rivers keep water resources in balance. In turn, healthy rivers are beautiful rivers and **are crucial to New Mexico's** ecotourism economy. But climate change, drought, increasing demand for water, failing infrastructure, and outdated water rights laws are pushing water supplies to their limits. Assuring that rivers can be resilient in the face of these stressors



Rio Grande near Belen, New Mexico. Photo: Quantina Martine/Audubon New Mexico

requires prioritizing healthy rivers through programs and activities that provide water to rivers during drought while providing assurances and incentives to property owners.

New Mexico Average Temperature in Fahrenheit



4,500

different species of plants and animals live in New Mexico

6,500

miles of perennial streams making healthy rivers a key component to the state's strategy for conserving biodiversity

80%

of New Mexico's at-risk species depend upon the riparian or aquatic habitat on these stream systems at some time in their life cycle

Nearly 400 Bird Species Rely on New Mexico Waterways



Yellow-billed Cuckoo

Photo: Kevin Jordan/Great Backyard Bird Count



Yellow-breasted Chat

Photo: Megumi Aita/Audubon Photography Awards



Yellow-throated Warbler

Photo: Judy Lyle/Great Backyard Bird Count



Willow Flycatcher

Photo: John Morrison/Audubon



Bell's Vireo

Photo: Sherman Barr/Audubon Photography Award

Environmental Flow Programs Can Be a Benefit to Landowners

Environmental flow programs **are not** a threat to existing water rights and water users. Environmental flow programs work within State water law to find solutions that work for both rivers and people, and typically include temporary water leasing arrangements, on-farm efficiency projects and habitat restoration. Water leasing programs provide drought year funding options to irrigators for temporarily leaving their water in a river while maintaining their water rights.

Protection of Stream Flows in NM

Already, New Mexico found some ways to address the flow needs of endangered species along the Rio Grande and Pecos Rivers. These solutions include the New Mexico Strategic Water Reserve and the leasing of San Juan Chama water on the Middle Rio Grande. Recently (2019) the New Mexico Office of the State Engineer recognized the environmental “beneficial use” of leaving a water right in a river. Because of these programs, New Mexico is well positioned to develop a more comprehensive stream flow enhancement program that works within the existing framework.

Call to Action

By prioritizing healthy rivers, New Mexico can better combat the changes associated with climate change. To accomplish this, New Mexico must understand where and when flow is most needed, have legal and administrative mechanisms for conducting flow protection, and procure staff and financial resources to activate such a program. In the coming years, we believe New Mexico should pursue the following goals:



Emphasize instream flows as a beneficial use by including environmental flows in the state's upcoming 50-year water plan and encourage the State Engineer's Office to issue more instream flow permits.



Identify and implement adaptive water management strategies such as environmental water leasing agreements, conservation and

Major NM Rivers



Map: Carol Zuber-Mallison/ZM Graphics

efficiency projects, habitat restoration projects and water shortage sharing agreements.



Adequately fund water infrastructure and conservation projects through New Mexico programs like the Strategic Water Reserve, the Water Trust Board and the River Stewardship Program.



Create a state-wide river protection program that addresses environmental flow needs.

Audubon Southwest is working with diverse partners
on the ground and in coalitions to work
towards healthy rivers and modernized water policy

