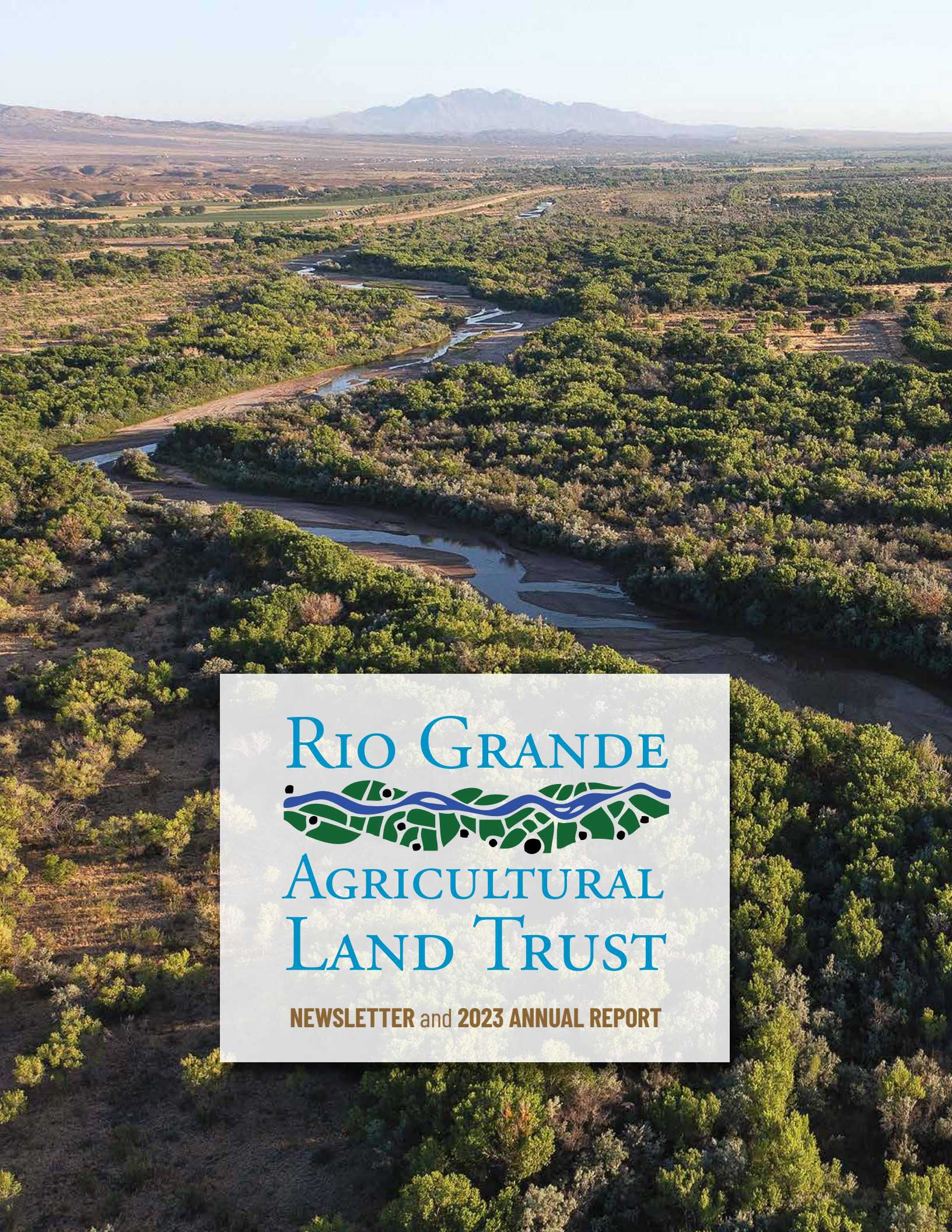

Rio Grande Agricultural Land Trust

NEWSLETTER and **2023 ANNUAL REPORT**

FROM THE **EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR**

Over the last 15 years, 12 million acres of America's farmland have been converted to development. We are losing farmland at a rate of almost 2 million acres a year. This is land that will never return to farmland. According to American Farmland Trust, New Mexico ranks as one of the highest in the nation in farmland loss and one of the lowest in policies to protect farmland and natural habitat.

Agriculture is dying a death of a thousand cuts. We are taking hits from every direction. It's not just development. Rising temperatures and drought are threatening farmland and natural habitat throughout the West. Protecting the viability of our farms, wildlife habitat, and water has never been more critical.

In this issue we share the importance of protecting agricultural land and water - not only for food and fodder but also for the habitat and connectivity it provides in sustaining the Central Flyway's migratory bird corridor. Over 400 species of migratory birds are funneled through the green ribbon of farmland and riparian habitat along the Rio Grande as they journey from the Arctic Circle to South America and back. We want to share stories of the connections and relationships between the wildlife refuges, local communities, and agricultural landowners who are protecting this threatened landscape for people and wildlife.

You may not know - RGALT does not only protect agricultural land. More than half of our easements protect Rio Grande riparian habitat and wetlands. The river, the riparian habitat, the farmland, the forests, and the watershed are interconnected. Because we recognize these connections and the importance of water on this landscape, RGALT works closely with water managers and water policy makers to conserve both land and water.

We are implementing creative approaches, policy reforms, and engaging diverse partners in our effort to protect our land and water in the middle Rio Grande landscape. You can read more about our conservation strides and policy efforts in the following pages.

Time is of the essence. The pace of conservation must increase and conservation programs need to be an option for all landowners, including the historic land rich and cash poor landowners who have been stewarding this landscape for generations. Implementing policy initiatives and creative strategies to ensure equitable conservation takes years of effort and a continuous commitment. It takes time and money to keep our communities' conservation needs at the forefront. It takes all of us, including our partners and especially community supporters like you.

Your annual donations and monthly memberships matter. Just like every acre matters, every dollar matters in our ability to protect the New Mexico we cherish. Our work to protect farmland, natural habitat, and open space benefits all of us - people and wildlife - now and for future generations.

Sincerely,

Cecilia Rosacker

Cecilia Rosacker
Executive Director

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ON THE COVER

Overlooking the Rio Grande farmland and floodplain in Lemitar, Socorro County, New Mexico

photo by **CHRISTI BODE**

PHOTO: CHRISTI BODE

Rio Grande at Los Chavez.
Photo by Paul Tashjian.

Natural Resources Conservation Service - ECO Grant

We are pleased to announce that RGALT was awarded an NRCS Equity in Conservation Outreach (ECO) Cooperative Agreement in 2024. This grant will improve outreach to underserved producers and communities and expand access to conservation programs, career opportunities, and USDA programs funded by the Inflation Reduction Act. The three-year funding follows RGALT's two-year 2021 NRCS Racial Equity and Justice Grant that provided capacity funding to assist NRCS with delivering their conservation programs to underserved producers.

USDA United States Department of Agriculture
Natural Resources Conservation Service

POLICY WORK AND PROGRAMS

Land of Enchantment Legacy Fund

History in the Making!

Over the past decade, RGALT has collaborated with a diverse coalition of conservation, agriculture, and outdoor recreation organizations to advocate for permanent conservation funding in New Mexico. These efforts led to the passage of SB-9, the Land of Enchantment Legacy Fund, signed into law by Governor Michelle Lujan-Grisham in March 2023. This landmark legislation created the state's first long-term funding source for land and water conservation, agriculture, and outdoor recreation, allocating $100 million to 11 previously underfunded programs. This historic investment will transform communities across New Mexico for generations. For more information, visit **www.enchantmentfund.org**.

In the 2024 legislative session, bipartisan leaders, including Senate Majority Leader Peter Wirth and House Appropriations Chairman Nathan Small, worked to increase the Legacy Fund to $300 million. This amount could grow to $460 million by 2050, generating additional income for conservation programs.

The Legacy Fund supports New Mexico's Natural Heritage Conservation Act (NHCA), which provides funding for conservation easements and land restoration. It will also enable access to federal conservation programs that have been largely unavailable for decades. This funding is vital for RGALT and our partners to address the conservation needs of historic landowners and ensure equitable conservation opportunities for landowners to protect their family lands and our cultural heritage.

In spring 2024, the first NHCA Request for Proposals was issued. RGALT submitted two proposals to protect 200 acres of farmland and pre-1907 water rights. If funded, NHCA resources will allow RGALT to leverage $1.6 million in funding from the NRCS-ALE Program to protect this farmland.

RGALT Participates in Joint Ventures DC Fly-In

In early March 2024, RGALT 's Executive Director Cecilia Rosacker, along with the Intermountain West Joint Venture (IWJV) staff and board members, and Audubon Southwest visited our nation's capital to meet with elected and appointed officials as well as federal agencies. What ensued was a whirlwind of incredible, solutions-focused conversations about how to advance collaborative conservation alongside success stories from the field in the Intermountain West.

This year RGALT and Audubon Southwest teamed up in meetings with our New Mexico congressional offices, emphasizing our partnership and collaborations with the Middle Rio Grande Conservancy District, the IWJV and others working collaboratively to protect the middle Rio Grande. We discussed the importance of protecting agricultural land, riparian habitat and water for the benefit of birds and other wildlife, the Rio Grande, the local foodshed, and urban and rural communities.

At the DC meetings, we shared the 2024 Agricultural Land Easement Report, which you can find on our website at rgalt.org. The report is a compilation of recommended actions that came out of the Denver workshop convened by the IWJV and University of Wyoming Ruckelshaus Institute to discuss NRCS easement programs. In January, RGALT joined NRCS State Conservationists and their easement staff, western land trusts, and other western conservation partners for a multi-day workshop to discuss ways to improve the NRCS Agricultural Land Easement Programs. Our goal is to make NRCS programs more accessible, and to ensure equitable conservation opportunities to underserved producers and communities.

IWJV Staff and Board Members and RGALT Director Cecilia Rosacker.

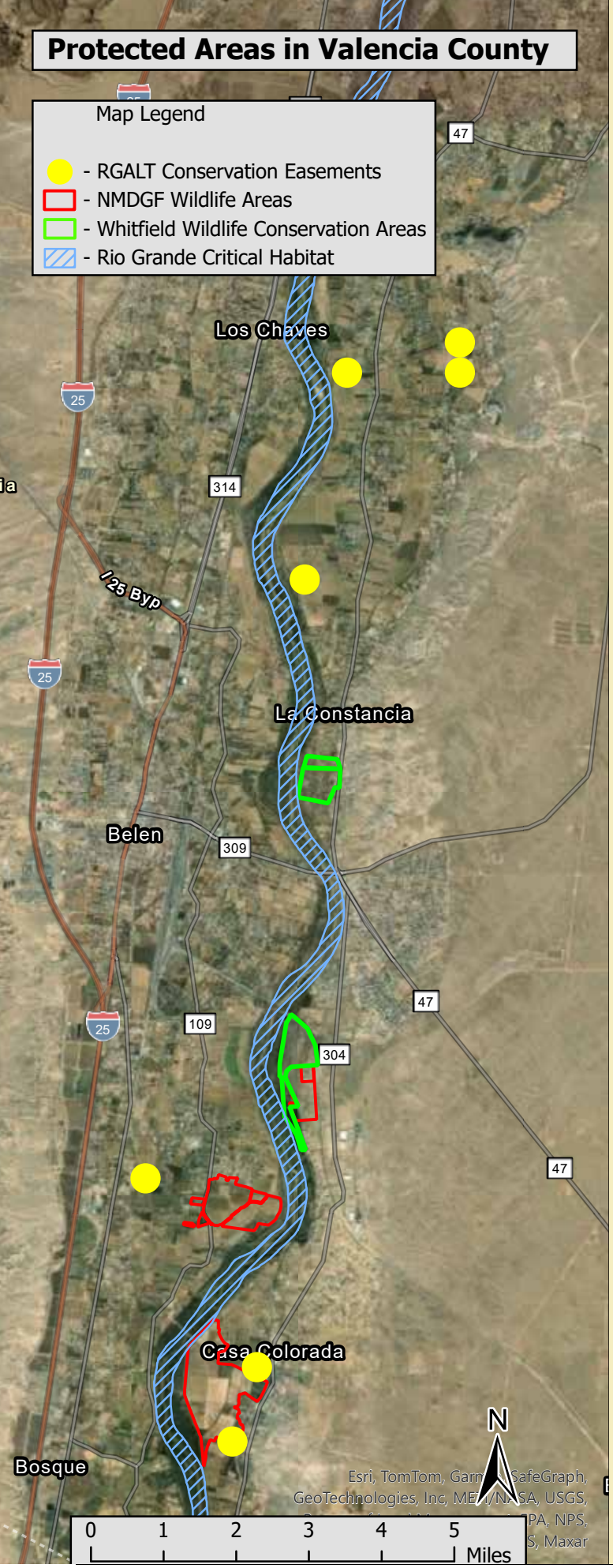
NRCS Agricultural Conservation Easement Programs

The Natural Resources Conservation Service's Agricultural Land Easement program (NRCS-ALE) is a federal program that permanently protects working agricultural lands and limits non-agricultural uses. The program's primary goal is to prevent the conversion of farmland, grasslands, and other productive agricultural areas to non-agricultural uses, which supports both food security and wildlife habitat conservation. Through the ALE program, NRCS provides funding to eligible entities such as land trusts, nonprofits, and government agencies to help purchase agricultural conservation easements from willing landowners. The program pays landowners up to 50% of the conservation easement value, with additional funding sometimes coming from local or state sources.

The ALE program is part of the broader Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP), which was established in the 2014 Farm Bill and reauthorized in subsequent Farm Bills. The ACEP program also includes the Wetland Reserve Easement program which is focused on protecting and restoring wetlands.

The Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) provides an additional $19.5 billion over 5 years to support USDA conservation programs. Implementation of IRA funding began in 2023 (fiscal year 2024) and included an additional $1.4 billion to the ACEP programs. This is in addition to the funding already authorized and available to ACEP through the Farm Bill.

RGALT has successfully completed three NRCS-ALE projects in Valencia County and is set to close on a fourth project on the Kettwich Farm in Bernalillo County. For the 2025 funding cycle, we plan to submit an additional 3-5 applications. Due to the complexity and stringent requirements of this program, the projects can take over 3 years to complete. RGALT has initiated a number of policy initiatives and delivered recommendations to the Land Trust Alliance NRCS Easement team and NRCS Easement Program Managers to help streamline the process and ensure that the program is equitable and accessible to underserved landowners and communities.



Conservation Strides in Valencia County

For decades, RGALT has been helping landowners in Valencia County protect their farmland. RGALT's first conservation easement in 2006 protected Ray Garcia's family farm in the historic village of Tomé, now an Albuquerque bedroom community. Farmland loss was ongoing then, and has accelerated in recent years as Los Lunas continues to grow and bring in new industries that have spurred development at a record pace. The farmland, the peaceful rural community and the cultural way of life is slipping away as development only continues to increase.

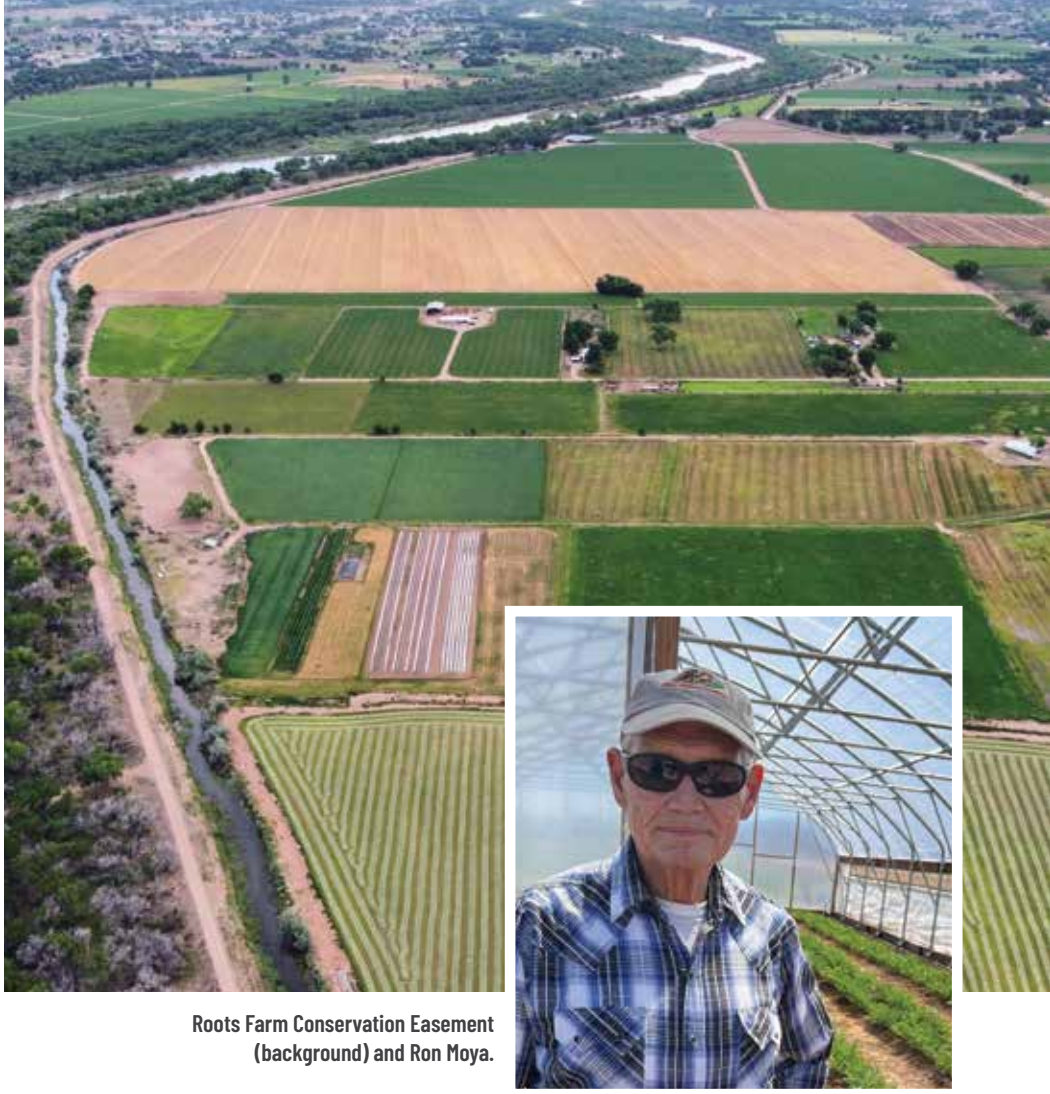
This past year, RGALT completed three easements protecting 80 acres of farmland in Valencia County. We accomplished this with funding through the NRCS-Agricultural Land Easement Program. RGALT engaged the Middle Rio Grande Conservancy District (MRGCD) in our effort and they provided a small one-time grant to help us secure the NRCS-ALE funding.

These irrigated farms not only provide food and fodder, they also provide essential wildlife habitat and connectivity. The flood-irrigated farm fields mimic historic river processes and provide critical wetland habitat for migratory and resident birds, particularly insectivorous songbirds, raptors, and migratory shorebirds and waterfowl who search for food in open areas and in the fields. The endangered Southwestern willow-flycatcher and threatened Western yellow-billed cuckoo often use brushy field edges around farms to search for insect prey. These farms are adjacent to a stretch of the Rio Grande that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has designated as critical habitat for both bird species, as well as for the endangered Rio Grande silvery minnow. The protection of these farms is beneficial to numerous other bird species, particularly during the nesting season when birds are feeding insects to their young. In addition to birds, agricultural fields and nearby riparian corridors and the federal and state managed refuges provide habitat for mammals both large and small; including elk, mule deer, black bear, mountain lions, bobcats, coyotes and more.

These protected farms provide significant natural habitat because of their close proximity to the Rio Grande and riparian floodplain, their connection to shallow groundwater associated with the river, the presence of native plants, and their location adjacent to high-quality natural habitat and protected areas. The expanse of green fields provides a beautiful agricultural landscape and open space that both people and wildlife depend on and enjoy.

Roots Farm Conservation Easement

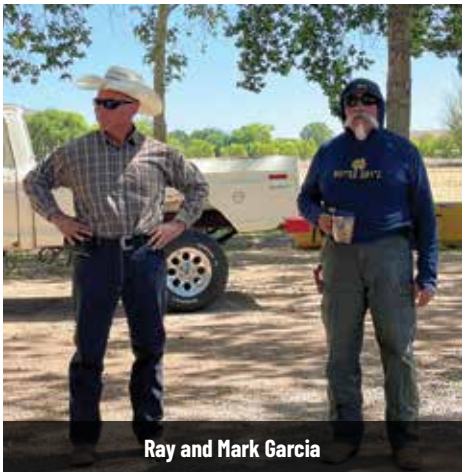
Ron and Mary Moya own and operate Roots Farm, a 20-acre farm with pre-1907 water rights on the east bank of the Rio Grande. Ron grew up nearby on his family's farm in Adelino, a community with a fascinating history from its founding in 1706 as a Spanish colonial outpost. The farm includes flood irrigated hay fields, 2 acres of diverse vegetables, and a mobile hoop house. The farm's vegetables, including hardy perennials like asparagus and a variety of others grown year-round, are watered by a drip irrigation system fed from the farm's permitted well. The vegetables are sold directly to the local community or distributed by the La Montañita Co-op. In addition to contributing to the local foodshed, the farm provides considerable conservation value for native wildlife, plants, water and soil. The farm is approximately two miles north of the Whitfield Wildlife Conservation Area and less than 10 miles from the state-owned Ladd S. Gordon Waterfowl Complex. Other nearby properties consist of small generational family farms with flood-irrigated crops, riparian bosque, and Chihuahuan desert upland habitat.



Roots Farm Conservation Easement (background) and Ron Moya.

"It's about culture. It's about a common vision. What do you want to leave behind? Because once it's gone, you never get it back."

MARK GARCIA



Ray and Mark Garcia

Casa Colorada and Tomé Conservation Easements

Mark Garcia and his brother Ray have been working with RGALT to protect their family's farmland for decades - lands that were part of the historic Casa Colorada and Tomé Spanish land grants. RGALT currently holds three conservation easements with Mark: two in Tomé and one in Casa Colorada. Before completing Mark's two NRCS-ALE projects earlier this year, RGALT worked with the NRCS - Farm and Ranchland Protection Program (FRPP) to secure an easement in 2009 that protects 18.67 acres of Mark's farm in Tomé. This property lies adjacent to Ray's NRCS-FRPP easement that was completed in 2006.

So far, the Garcia brothers have protected almost 115 acres of irrigated farmland and historic water rights. Together with Ray's son who is also involved in the family farm business, they produce hay crops for local dairies and others in the community. Mark says, "It's a great feeling when you have this product that's coming from your land and you're sustaining other families, not just the people who work for us, but other families outside because of what you're doing."

The Casa Colorada easement protects 17 acres of irrigated farmland on the east side of the Rio Grande and borders the Casa Colorada Wildlife Management Area (WMA). Casa Colorada WMA is a 420-acre farm that is planted in alfalfa and corn to benefit migratory birds, particularly Sandhill Cranes. It is part of the much larger Ladd S. Gordon Waterfowl Complex which collectively protects over 5,000 acres of high-quality riparian bosque, floodplain wetlands, upland habitat, and irrigated farm fields for the benefit of wildlife. Other protected areas near the Casa Colorada easement include the 200-acre Whitfield Wildlife Conservation Area and the 220,000-acre Sevilleta National Wildlife Refuge.

Mark baling hay on his Tomé conservation easement

Ray with his granddaughter

The Tomé easement protects 42 acres of irrigated farmland and 85 acre-feet of pre-1907 water rights on the east side of the Rio Grande. Numerous old-growth Rio Grande cottonwoods, Goodding's willows, New Mexico olives, and other tree and shrub species make up the bosque adjacent to the property. The property is bordered on the west and east by the Middle Rio Grande Conservancy District's irrigation canals and access roads that are used by the local community for recreational purposes such as walking, biking, horseback riding, birding, and hunting. The protected farm will allow the community to enjoy the beauty of the agricultural landscape and open space with uninterrupted scenic vistas of El Cerro de Tomé and the Manzano Mountains as the backdrop.

After we closed on the Tomé easement Mark said to me, *"Cecilia, we need to do this faster! Lately, we've seen unfamiliar SUVS driving along our irrigation canals. Today, they told my sister that they were developers looking to buy farmland or water rights. She told them about my family's partnership with the Rio Grande Agricultural Land Trust to protect our land and water with conservation easements."*

Mark's Casa Colorada conservation easement

Connecting People to the Land Through Food

As the director of the Rio Grande Agricultural Land, it has always been my priority to connect people to the land through food. As the owner of a 30-acre organic farm, my side hustle has always been feeding the community by growing food for restaurants, grocery stores, and farmers' markets. My passion for protecting New Mexico's farmland comes not only from a desire to protect the beautiful open landscape and wildlife habitat it provides, but to protect our ability to grow food for the community - both people and wildlife.

RGALT's farm to table dinner fundraisers are our way to bring the community together to not only celebrate our land and water conservation work, but to celebrate New Mexico's vibrant fall harvest and our cultural heritage so closely tied to the land. It was wonderful to be able to host our 2023 dinner at the Gutiérrez-Hubbell House, a historic farm in the Albuquerque's South Valley that exemplifies our agricultural heritage.

In 2024 we held a more intimate farm to table dinner event at Farm Shark, a small urban farm in the South Valley. RGALT serves diverse agricultural communities from small urban farms like Farm Shark's one-acre farm to farms that are hundreds of acres in size. This year we wanted to highlight the diverse bounty of what a small urban farm can grow and provide for the community - a testament that every acre matters.

Our dinner events, which showcase all locally produced food and drinks, are our way to connect the community to the land, the water, the people who feed us and to each other. These unique dining experiences are only possible because of our strong relationships in the community – relationships with farmers, chefs, businesses, conservation partners and individual community members. Each item on the table is sourced with intention, freshly harvested, cooked on-site and shared at the table to create a taste of our cultural traditions. We want to express our deepest gratitude for the generosity and commitment of all involved and our gratitude to each of our supporters who have joined us for dinner over the years.

We hope our gatherings leave all who attend with a strong heart connection to the land, a sense of community, and a desire to continue supporting RGALT's work to protect the places we cherish, the New Mexico we love - one farm at a time.

We hope you will join us for dinner on one of our protected farms in upcoming years.

With gratitude,

Cecilia

Thousands of Wings, Hundreds of Acres

Preserving New Mexico's Middle Rio Grande corridor, for people and wildlife

Story and photos by **CHRISTI BODE**

I tend to dwell in curiosity, and curiosity steered my car a couple hundred miles south on I-25 - past piñon-juniper forests, through dust storms and beyond the city's buzz. From the highway, Exit 175 is rather unassuming, but I take it anyways and point it east. There are no services here, for humans anyway.

Through the windshield, a shimmer of gold boldly separates itself from the surrounding desert palette. A long, thin amorphous form gently outlines the top of the golden layer, continuously moving in a southerly direction. Curiosity pulls me closer. I'm willing to chance an encounter with whatever is unfolding by the river's edge, in the most rural of places.

Here, generational farmers spread water diverted from the Rio Grande across their fields, engaging in irrigation practices rooted in acequia culture dating back to the 1600s. It's an area rich in farming and hunting grounds, where landowners keep the water flowing for the benefit of people and wildlife.

Paul Tashjian, Director of Freshwater Conservation at Audubon Southwest, notes that this interdependent system is supported by farmers mimicking what the river did historically.

"It's the same species that have always relied on this habitat, but instead they're using farm fields that would have been floodplains and wetlands," says Tashjian.

New Mexico's Middle Rio Grande valley is the heart of the Central Flyway, a critical migratory corridor that stretches more than 5,000 miles north to south, from the Arctic Circle to South America. Over 400 bird species funnel through this river corridor, or stop and stay for the winter, as it provides sustenance and shelter along the way. Pockets of wetlands and irrigated pastures are scattered among acres of hay meadows and grain fields. It's a route carefully designed by nature and is free of restrictive boundaries drawn by people. A sandhill crane does not know the difference between a public refuge, tribal land or a private farm; it follows the food.

"What RGALT does is critically important and nobody else is doing it. They see the Middle Rio Grande as a whole system - farmland, migratory birds, riparian habitat - it's all a part of it."

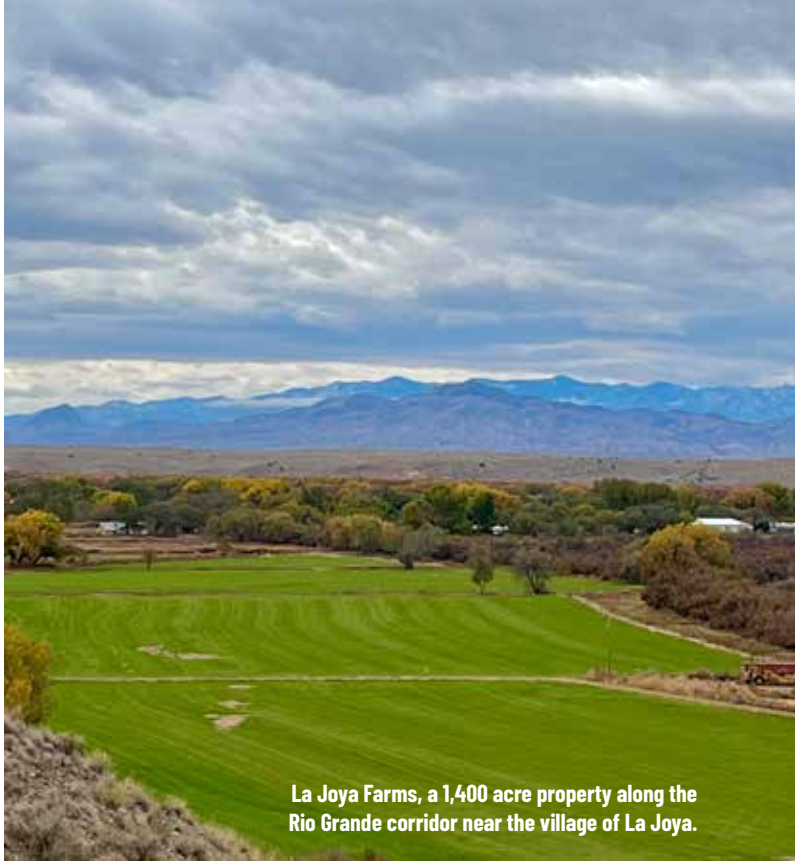
PAUL TASHJIAN

It is also a route that is under threat. Science shows1 that the habitat in the Middle Rio Grande, which includes communities from Bernalillo to San Antonio, NM, is supported by agricultural practices like flood irrigation and small grain cultivation. It also reveals the long-standing balance of agricultural water use and wetland sustainability is at risk due to increasing aridity and water scarcity, caused by climate change. The Rio Grande ran dry for nearly 50 miles in the Middle Valley, including five miles in Albuquerque, for the first time in over 40 years in July 2022. Drying in reaches below San Acacia is an annual occurrence during the summer months.

Developmental pressure adds to the competition for limited resources, particularly for farms on the fringes in the Albuquerque-metro area. In the last two decades, more than 5 million acres of farmland in New Mexico have been converted to residential development and other uses. If current trends continue, an area more than six times the size of Santa Fe will be fragmented or converted to non-agricultural uses by 20402.

In parallel, the number of acres irrigated within the Middle Rio Grande Conservancy District's service area has declined by over 30%, from 2006 to 20233.

Tashjian, who regularly floats the Rio Grande stretch downstream of Albuquerque when there's enough flow, has his own unique observations:



La Joya Farms, a 1,400 acre property along the Rio Grande corridor near the village of La Joya.

"I just saw some ibises hanging out on a flooded field the other day - that's habitat right there. The more land gets chipped away at, it just makes what's remaining all that more important to try to keep functioning and intact."

A landowner's decision to sell or keep their farm is driven by a host of reasons, including finances, age, family dynamics and personal values.

Hank and Kelly Taliaferro see their farm as a vital connection to nature and want to keep it that way. Deciding to work with the Rio Grande Agricultural Land Trust (RGALT) was an obvious choice for the Taliaferros, who wanted to protect their farmland and water rights along with the wildlife habitat it supports.

RGALT works with landowners and a range of partners to protect privately owned irrigated agricultural lands in perpetuity using conservation easements. The organization's work encompasses much of the Middle Rio Grande Valley, including Sandoval, Bernalillo, Valencia and Socorro counties. Protection of these areas also means preserving local food sheds, open spaces, wildlife corridors and the cultural integrity of central New Mexico's communities.

"What RGALT does is critically important and nobody else is doing it. They see the [Middle Rio Grande] as a whole system - farmland, migratory birds, riparian habitat - it's all a part of it," Tashjian reflects, who previously served as an RGALT board member.

The Taliaferros own La Joya Farms, a 1,400 acre property along the Rio Grande corridor near the village of La Joya. This community has one of the last remaining acequia associations in

Sandhill Cranes visit the Kettwich property.

the Middle Valley. The family has five conservation easements with RGALT that protect 350 acres of farmland and natural habitat.

"...We really see a conservation easement as a way to preserve [the farm] forever. We're big fans of keeping it green, keeping it irrigated and keeping it beautiful," says Hank. He admits the process was a long, complicated undertaking, but is grateful to work with someone whose values align with theirs and helped guide them along the way.

"It makes us feel good to be a part of what RGALT does," Hank continued.

Their most recent easement includes 40 acres of irrigated farmland and 56 acres forested wetland, providing habitat for raptors and winter waterbirds, migratory and nesting songbirds, including the endangered Southwestern Willow Flycatcher. Mature cottonwood galleries and mixed understory paired with sand bars and islands that form backchannels make this place a hotspot for birds. Hank, a self-proclaimed "Wild Bird Man", has personally recorded over 250 avian species at the farm.

What makes the protection of La Joya Farms especially important is its proximity to the Ladd S. Gordon Waterfowl Complex, about 5,000 acres cumulatively, that is managed by New Mexico Game and Fish. This complex contains four wildlife management areas in Valencia and Socorro Counties: Bernardo, La Joya, Casa Colorada and Belen Waterfowl Areas. Together with the Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) to the south, they feed about half of the waterbirds wintering in the Middle Rio Grande Valley. Further upstream, Sevilleta NWR and Valle de Oro NWR which are managed for various conservation and recreational purposes, round out publicly-managed wildlife areas along this stretch of river corridor.

On my return north, curiosity steers me in another direction - one that is vastly different from Exit 175. I know there is a bosque tucked away somewhere in the background, but it is hidden by the dozens of industrial plants and manufacturing facilities lining the road. Cutting past the noise and pollution, signage for Valle de Oro National Wildlife Refuge comes into view: a 570 acre site along the east bank of the Rio Grande that once was part of a large dairy farm. The refuge, established in 2012, now protects the largest remaining plot of undeveloped farmland in the Albuquerque metropolitan area.

Valle de Oro's transition to what the US Fish and Wildlife Services describes as "a mosaic of native Middle Rio Grande Valley habitats" is a slow one. The landscape is still largely characterized by huge tracts of fallow alfalfa fields dotted with thistle and tumbleweed. Canada geese and sandhill cranes opt for open fields in nearby communities.

Don Kettwich stewards 40 acres in the South Valley and shares a fence with Valle de Oro NWR. His property is a combination of mature cottonwood galleries, native grass and alfalfa fields. He's seen the land surrounding his property to the east and south be subdivided into small acreage lots, then converted into residential housing.

"You live where your wife wants to live," admits Kettwich, who purchased the farm in 1975 with the intent to keep it in irrigated agriculture. His wife, Sharon, loved horses and the two sandhill cranes that found a safe haven on their land, returning year after year. Don said "she swore it was the same pair every time" and looked forward to seeing them. I noted their presence by a water tank under a russet-colored canopy soon after arriving at the Kettwich's farm.

Over the past 50 years, there were times when the family was financially strapped and selling off a piece of land would have provided a cushion. The Kettwichs worked hard to avoid that, and it wasn't until recently Don decided to put his land into a conservation easement with RGALT.

Barns on the Kettwich property.

A sandhill crane does not know the difference between a public refuge, tribal land or a private farm; it follows the food.

The Rio Grande at Bernardo looking south to Socorro.

"My wife and I could never envision a bunch of homes on our place and we'd like to maintain the status quo. [Sharon] would have really liked to see this place as it is today. So I'm doing it for her sake and mine," shares Kettwich.

Neighbors have expressed gratitude for the open space and peace Kettwich provides for the community. Don jokingly responded back once: "...If I ever won the lottery, I'd buy every house to the east of me, tear it down and convert it back to alfalfa." The two neighbors exchanged laughs.

On their own, these wildlife management areas are isolated postage stamps along the flyway. Public and private farmlands throughout the valley go hand in hand, as this concentrated patchwork of food sources, nesting and roosting areas helps birds expend less energy and build reserves for the long journey ahead.

Jennifer Owen-White, former Valle de Oro refuge manager, recognizes the interplay between public, private and tribal lands when it comes to flyway support along the river. This is not only true for migratory species like birds and butterflies, but also terrestrial animals such as deer and elk.

"We've got lots and lots of species that we probably wouldn't see if it were just the refuge. But having the agricultural land, the Rio Grande Bosque State Park, the tribal land - it really makes this all one big, connected corridor, which is really amazing to see," says Owen-White.

The water future is grim for the Rio Grande, but not all is lost. We have an opportunity to create an adaptable river system, with both human and natural ecosystems in mind. We can't create more water, so what can we create?

"We need private-public partnerships to really be resilient towards all kinds of changes, whether that's federal funding challenges or some sort of crisis...it's important to have duplication in the system," says Tashjian. "I feel like we just gotta keep on, keeping on."

The Rio Grande Agricultural Land Trust is doing just that: cultivating a healthy Middle Rio Grande where all can thrive by working alongside agency partners and private landowners who have a shared vision.

"A part of being human is that connection to nature. I think when you listen to the birds sing, or you listen to the elk bugle or you'll find the yellow-billed cuckoo on its nests there in the cottonwoods. It gives me hope for the future," Hank shares.

Kelly nods in agreement. "What I would like to leave behind is a conserved area that people can enjoy, not just our family, but for the public...to enjoy it as adults and that their kids can come here and enjoy the wildlife and the greenery. My hope for this area is that it continues to stay wild and that humans can continue to appreciate it."

FOOTNOTES:

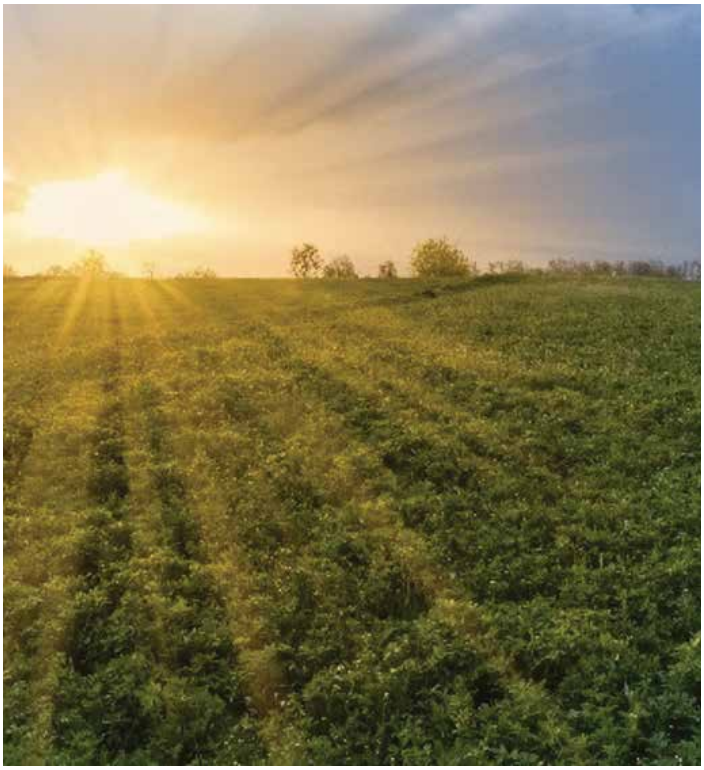
1 Intermountain West Joint Venture's 2021 report, *The Call of the Cranes*

2 American Farmland Trust's 2022 report, *Farms Under Threat*

3 Data provided by MRGCD, October 2024. Irrigated acres do not include irrigation by well or irrigated Pueblo Land.

Alfalfa's Bad Rap

by **CECILIA ROSACKER**



Clinging to the cool morning air, the sweet perfume of alfalfa wafts in through my bedroom window, the comforting click – click - click rhythmically playing - the tune of hay balers at pre-dawn.

The scent and sounds of summer in New Mexico's valleys are beautifully described in our state song.

"O' Fair New Mexico"

Rugged and high sierras, with deep canyons below;

Dotted with fertile valleys, is Nuevo México.

Fields full of sweet alfalfa, richest perfumes bestow,

State of the apple blossoms, is Nuevo México.

Early, before the working day began, a farmer called me about protecting his farm with a conservation easement and praised alfalfa. He said, "I wish you could come by today; it's so beautiful. We just cut alfalfa, and it's one of the biggest stands we've ever had! Last season, we participated in the Middle Rio Grande Conservancy District fallowing program, forgoing irrigation for a year. Despite the lack of irrigation, the drought-tolerant alfalfa survived and grew enough with summer rains to pasture horses all winter. After a year of no irrigation, we fertilized and watered the field, producing some of the best alfalfa ever."

Alfalfa is crucial to the agricultural economy in New Mexico and throughout the West due to market demand and its drought tolerance. In the Middle Rio Grande, farmers can get 4-6 cuts a year, with alfalfa plantings lasting five to even ten years without tillage. While it doesn't grow much in winter, it provides livestock forage. Alfalfa is irrigated every 21 days, often less frequently than chile and other row crops. From my 30 years of experience farming, a 21-day flood irrigation cycle can work for row crops too, depending on water timing and quality.

Alfalfa is more flexible regarding water quality and timing, meeting "regenerative agriculture" and "healthy soil" criteria, and providing habitat for wildlife and insects. Some chile and vegetable farmers use alfalfa to build soil nitrogen before returning to row crop production.

Alfalfa can tolerate poor-quality irrigation water. In Socorro County for example, irrigators often rely on monsoon run-off water which is full of sediment, or drain water from upstream farms, for irrigating their crops. This poor quality water can result in clay layers or a salt rind on fields, limiting the benefits of cover cropping practices.

Alfalfa has received a bad rap in recent years, often due to misinformation. However, western partners are working with scientists to gather and share data to counter this. Alfalfa is resilient, drought-tolerant, and economically viable. One farmer can grow hundreds of acres of alfalfa with minimal labor costs, maintaining the economic viability of the farm.

Finally, alfalfa is part of the national and global supply chain. As food for cattle it contributes to products like leather goods, medicine, tires, asphalt, paint, drywall, and even white sugar.

As drought conditions worsen in the west, alfalfa is becoming a choice crop. Western farmers are struggling to find adequate water supplies, and competing interests are pressuring the government to cut the water supply that farmers need to grow our food - and forage crops like alfalfa - which is a foundational food chain crop. Alfalfa is important to rural communities, and it is grown throughout the West for good reasons.

With the growing disconnect between consumers, farmers, and the agricultural processes that sustain the world, there is a clear need to bridge this knowledge gap and enlighten the public about the significance of water in our food production – including alfalfa and forage crops. That's why the Family Farm Alliance has developed a new webpage to help the public, policy makers and journalists better understand the rest of the story about alfalfa and forage production in the Colorado River Basin and other parts of the American West.

This new resource features facts, reports, opinion pieces and other information generated by Family Farm Alliance, academic researchers, and our conservation allies throughout the West. We encourage you to check out their website at www.familyfarmalliance.org.

Yellow-breasted Chat.
Photo by Amy Erickson

Audubon's Migration Explorer Has Landed!

Every spring and fall, the skies above us fill with millions of birds in one of Earth's most spectacular natural phenomena: avian migration. Some of our favorite New Mexico birds including Greater Roadrunners, Gambel's Quail, and Ladder-backed Woodpeckers are resident species - they are able to take advantage of the state's varied habitats and relatively mild winters to avoid the long-distance travels that other species must undertake. Migratory species, however, face challenging and risky journeys that require enormous amounts of energy, precise navigational skills, and the ability to overcome a variety of natural and human-made obstacles to reach their destination. For some species such as the familiar Swainson's Hawk, their twice-annual journey can be over 10,000 miles from their breeding grounds in western North America to wintering grounds in Argentina!

The Central Flyway is one of four major North American bird migration corridors and extends from northern breeding grounds in the Arctic and Canada through the Great Plains and central United States to wintering grounds in Central and South America. The Rio Grande serves as a vital migration corridor along the western limit of the Central Flyway where water sources and suitable habitats are scarce. The river and its surrounding riparian habitat and flood-irrigated fields provide essential resources for millions of migratory birds traveling the flyway each spring and fall. As flood-irrigated hay fields provide up to 60% of the wetland habitat in the western United States, protecting farmland is critical for supporting migratory species along their difficult and lengthy journey.

RGALT's conservation easements in the Central Flyway permanently protect flood-irrigated family farms, riparian bosque habitat, and Chihuahuan Desert grasslands. Because migratory species require high-quality habitat along the entire length of their migration route, our conservation work is connected throughout the Central Flyway and beyond. Protecting migratory birds and their habitat requires landscape-scale conservation efforts, and with the ongoing decline of many native species, our work to protect the places birds need is now more critical than ever.

Do you want to take a closer look at your favorite species as they complete their annual migration? Check out Audubon's new Bird Migration Explorer by visiting explorer.audubon.org. This interactive website is your guide to the heroic annual journeys made by over 450 bird species, and the challenges they face along the way. Learn more about individual species, the migratory birds you are likely to see at a specific location, or a conservation challenge birds face. Happy birding!

Visit Audubon's new Bird Migration Explorer at **www.explorer.audubon.org**

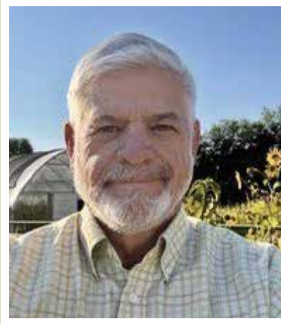
PHOTO: PAUL TASHJIAN

Meet RGALT's New Board Members

Will Carter

We're pleased to welcome William A. Carter, an expert in technology policy and responsible innovation, to RGALT's board. From 2020-2023, Will led AI Policy at Google and, prior to that, was Deputy Director of the Technology Policy Program at CSIS, where he focused on international tech policy. His earlier career at Goldman Sachs involved covering geopolitical risk in the tech and telecom sectors. He holds a B.A. in economics from New York University.

Will moved to Socorro in 2020 with his wife Mariah, who was born and raised in Socorro. Drawn by the area's beauty and sense of community, they decided to make it their permanent home. Inspired by Mariah's family's farming roots, he values the opportunity to support local farmers and ranchers and is committed to preserving Socorro's natural landscapes and agricultural heritage. Will's background in building strategic partnerships and shaping public policy will be a great asset in advancing RGALT's mission to protect land and water resources.



Mike Hamman, former NM State Engineer

We're excited to welcome Mike Hamman, former New Mexico State Engineer, to RGALT's board. Mike brings over 40 years of engineering and water resource management expertise, with a career primarily focused on New Mexico's Rio Grande basin. He recently retired after an extensive career, most recently serving as State Engineer, where he was charged with administering all of the state's water resources. Prior to that he was CEO and Chief Engineer of the Middle Rio Grande Conservancy District, where he oversaw irrigation and water management for the region's 60,000 acres of farmland, including tribal lands.

Previously, Mike was Area Manager for the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, responsible for 13 federal water projects across multiple states. He has also held roles with the NM Interstate Stream Commission, the City of Santa Fe, and the Jicarilla Apache Nation, where he advanced water rights and developed critical water infrastructure. Raised in Taos and a UNM Civil Engineering graduate, Mike lives with his family on a farm in Corrales, NM. His deep understanding of New Mexico's water challenges makes him a valuable addition to RGALT's mission of land and water conservation.

CURRENT BOARD AND STAFF ROSTER

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Learn more about our work and watch video featuring our landowners at **www.rgalt.org**

Publication Support:
LEF Foundation
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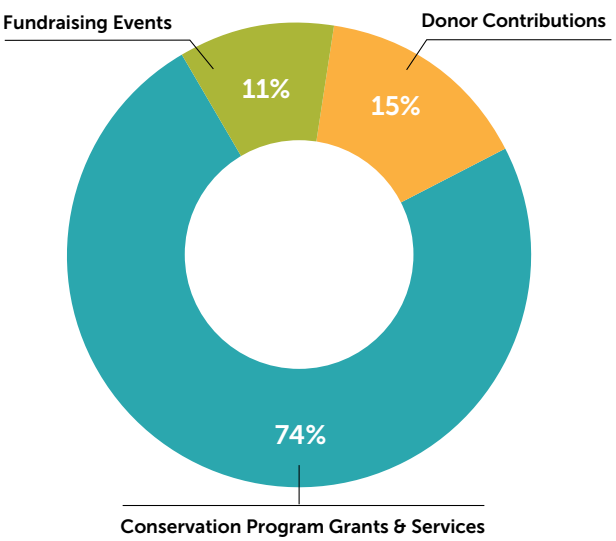
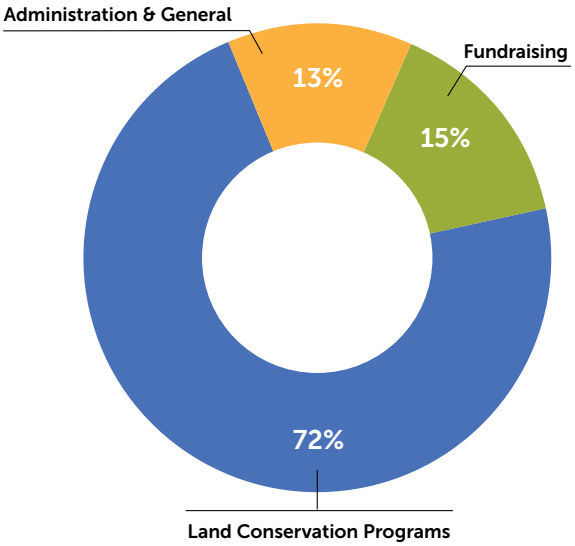
2023 FISCAL REPORT

INCOME



EXPENSES



Landowner's Donation of Conservation Easement Value: $1,050,000

RGALT's work would be impossible without the generosity and conservation ethic of landowners. Landowners matched the NRCS-ALE grant dollars with an equal donation of land value.

Thank You RGALT 2023 Supporters!

RGALT relies on community support to achieve our work to protect land and water for future generations. We can't do this work without you, and we are truly grateful for your contributions each year.

Partnerships and Grants

USDA-NRCS Racial Equity and Justice Grant

Ciudad Soil and Water Conservation District & Bernalillo County Intergovernmental Agreement

Middle Rio Grande Conservancy District

Friends of Valle de Oro National Wildlife Refuge

McCune Charitable Foundation

LEF Foundation

American Farmland Trust

Whole Foods

Santa Fe Community Foundation / Wallace Genetic Foundation

SB Foundation

Nusenda Credit Union

Nebraska Community Foundation

Ducks Unlimited

Land Trust Alliance

$1,000-$4,999

Sayre Gerhart

Bravo Farms

Sandra Postel and Virginia Smith

Cathy & Brod Sharp

Nancy Ranney and David Levi

Bernalillo County Commissioner Steven Michael Quezada

Bernalillo County Commissioner Eric Olivas

Bernalillo County Commissioner Barbara Baca

Bernalillo County Commissioner Adriann Barboa

Middle Rio Grande Conservancy District

Lightning Boy Foundation

New Mexico Harvest

La Montañita Co-op

$300-$999

Deborah Bankson

John Leeper

Eleanor Miller

Elizabeth Hume

Mary and Jim Ruff

Paula Castillo Arts

McCune Foundation

Intermountain West Joint Venture

Bill Turner

Valencia SWCD

Reina Ehrenfeucht

Elizabeth Foster

Ann Simon

Rancho Corazon

Audubon Southwest

Sidetrack Brewing

Sheehan Winery

$150-$299

Mary Nutt

John Pineda

John and Susan Kelly

Tanya Trujillo

Summer Schulz

Johnny Pack and Mary Gillard

Tom and Janice Erickson

Lisa Cummings

Don Kettwich

Sarah Ruffs

Miriam Greenwood

Greg Gould

Duana Draszkiewicz

Ron and Mary Moya

Bill Holmes

Doris Rhodes

Benjamin Bankson

Denise Fort

James Utton

Bella Rusher

Leif Youngberg

Robert Polka

Mathew Hayes

Quantina Martine

Sarah Biondi

James McCord

Nicholas Nellos

David Ottaviano

Michael Donovan

Lindsey Diaz

Pam McGroarty

$1-$149

Angela Bordegaray

Caballero Crafters

Tracy Clark

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Ronald Thomas

Stephanie Russo Baca

John Utton

Elena Taylor

Sarah Noss

Bill Weise

Scott Strickland

Kelly Parkhill

Save Our Bosque Task Force

Rex Vogler

Many Ways to Give

Gift of Cash or Securities.
Make a one-time donation by mailing a check payable to RGALT or visit www.rgalt.org.

Become a Sustaining Member.
Make a recurring monthly gift.

IRA Distributions.
If you are 72 years or more, you can make your required minimum distribution a tax-free gift to RGALT by designating RGALT as the recipient.

Employer Matching Gifts.
Check with your employer to see if they will match your gift or monthly contribution.

Planned Giving.
Leave a legacy of land conservation for future generations by including RGALT in your will or estate plan.

Gifts of Real Estate.
Gifts of land or other real estate allows RGALT to turn these gifts into capital for achieving our mission to protect land and water.

Rio Grande Agricultural Land Trust

Visit our website, www.rgalt.org or contact us at 505-270-4421

Scan Our QR code to donate!

PHOTO BY PATRICK ON UNSPLASH

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SAVE THE DATE

May 17th - *Spring Bird Tour and Dinner at La Joya Farms*