



## U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service – Southwest Region



### Recovery Act Partnership Projects in Northern New Mexico

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Two non-profit organizations in northern New Mexico recently teamed up with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's (Service) Southwest Region to participate in partnership projects where private landowners, institutions or groups create mutually beneficial agreements with the Service to work together toward conservation goals.

The two Recovery Act-funded projects included mechanically thinning piñon and juniper to benefit wildlife, migratory birds and reduce possible wildfire fuel loads at the NRA Whittington Center south of Raton, and partnering with Earth Works Institute in Santa Fe to work with private landowners to improve wildlife and riparian habitat in the Galisteo River watershed. Landowners provide funding for the agreed-upon habitat improvements, which is partly reimbursed, and are provided technical assistance to spearhead the project. In exchange, the landowner agrees to maintain the project for a certain number of years and to abide by short-term restrictions regarding use of the improved land.

#### NRA Whittington Center

With persistent dry conditions, relentless wind and a severe drought offering little moisture, staff at the Whittington Center knew they needed to address thick stands of piñon and juniper at the 52-square-mile outdoor recreation facility before they became the next target of an out-of-control wildfire. The abundant trees, which are historically managed with natural burn cycles, were also choking out habitat for wildlife such as mule deer, migratory birds and turkeys.



NRA Whittington Center near Raton, N.M.

Whittington Center Executive Director Wayne Armacost said he was troubled by a nearby situation at Vermejo Park Ranch west of Raton in 2010 when a controlled burn got out of hand and turned into an untamable, destructive wildfire.



Aerial view of tree thinned areas at Whittington

“With wildfires, it’s not a matter of if but when. Our goal was to attack the property, thin it out the massive fuel load, and then eventually do a controlled burn to lessen the chances of a crowning fire,” Armacost explained.

Using \$40,000 in Recovery Act funds and \$16,000 from the Center and donations, Armacost hired nearby Rue Logging Company of Colorado in late 2009 to perform tree thinning on 400 acres. A crew of around seven workers used three hydro axes to chop down and

mulch on-site piñon and juniper trees, oak brush and mahogany. During the course of the project, Rue Logging donated thinning services on 40 additional acres.

The project was completed in February 2010. Armacost said he could almost immediately see wildlife moving into the newly thinned areas.

“The mule deer and the birds are now utilizing habitat in places they wouldn’t go into before because it was so thick. There were elk in there during the rut and we’re also seeing more bears in the area,” Armacost notes. “As a non-profit, our budget is limited as far as what we can do for wildlife preservation. We would not have been able to do a project on this scale on our own.”



Mule deer on tree thinned areas at the Whittington Center

### Earth Works Institute

The Galisteo River Basin near Santa Fe is in only area in New Mexico where four unique ecosystems come together. The basin, with wetland and riparian areas lush with diverse plants and animals, is also part of a wildlife corridor that spans from the Rocky Mountains to Mexico used by creatures such as mountain lions, bears and other migrating wildlife species.

Earth Works Institute is a non-profit environmental services organization focused on the development of sustainable communities and healthy ecosystems. They also provide consulting and technical services for various clients, including private landowners, tribal communities, local governments and organizations.

Earth Works Executive Director Jan-Willem Jansens explains in 2009 they pursued a partnership project to establish relationships with landowners in the Galisteo region and restore habitat and wildlife across the basin.

“More than 70 percent of wildlife diversity is in riparian areas. Wetland restoration needs to fit the goals for wildlife connectivity,” Jansens says. “With our private partners, we want to create a model, and then gradually try to replicate the model elsewhere.”



Staff from Earth Works stand near a pond they built on the Doyle ranch in the Galisteo Basin

Forty percent of the land area of the Galisteo watershed is held by eight landowners, with 70 percent of that land privately owned, according to Jansens. Wildlife needs to cross between eco-regions, and when they do, they often have to cross several dangerous highways and private ranches that have few natural resources, such as water and plants, available for the animals to use, Jansens said. The goal is to provide water sources and nutritious plants and trees on ranches and other private lands for wildlife conservation.

Jansens says 15 landowners initially wanted to participate in the wildlife conservation project. With \$19,000 in Recovery Act funds, the institute decided to hire a crew in May 2010 to concentrate efforts on two properties in the Galisteo Basin due to their high ecological and hydrological values: the Doyle ranch and the Singleton property.

Gene and Vicki Doyle own a ranch just across the road from the Galisteo River, pocked with pinon and juniper trees. The Earth Works crew, headed by restoration ecologist John Busemeyer, planted nearly 100 trees provided by local nurseries with a water drip line to each plant and build a shallow lined pond to be used as a wildlife drinker. They removed non-native species on the property including Russian olive and salt cedar trees and replaced them with drought-tolerant native plants and trees such as three-leafed sumac, golden currant and honey and black locust. They also planted species commonly used for wildlife forage such as chokecherries, wild plum, currant, sand cherries and roses.



Newly planted tree and water drip line on Doyle Ranch

On the property owned by Mark Singleton, the crew spearheaded wetland restoration near Cañada de los Alamos. They built a pond that is fed with water runoff from the house's roof, and planted forage berries, wild lilacs and more than 100 fruit trees.

The crew worked from May through September 2010 on the two projects, with work wrapping up in December. Dee Word, 84, a relative who lives on the Doyle property, said he is impressed by the work of Earth Works and says he sees a lot more wildlife when he now walks and monitors the property.



Dee Word, who lives at the Doyle Ranch

“Oh yeah, there’s a quite a few jackrabbits, deer and other critters scampering around here now. And once the plants grow a little bit and really get going in a few years, it’s going to be really nice for them out here,” Word remarks with a smile.

Busemeyer said the projects hit a nerve with many people. “They are slowly getting it and I can see the change in attitudes where now we have a population of ranchers interested in conservation and doing what’s right for the land,” he says.