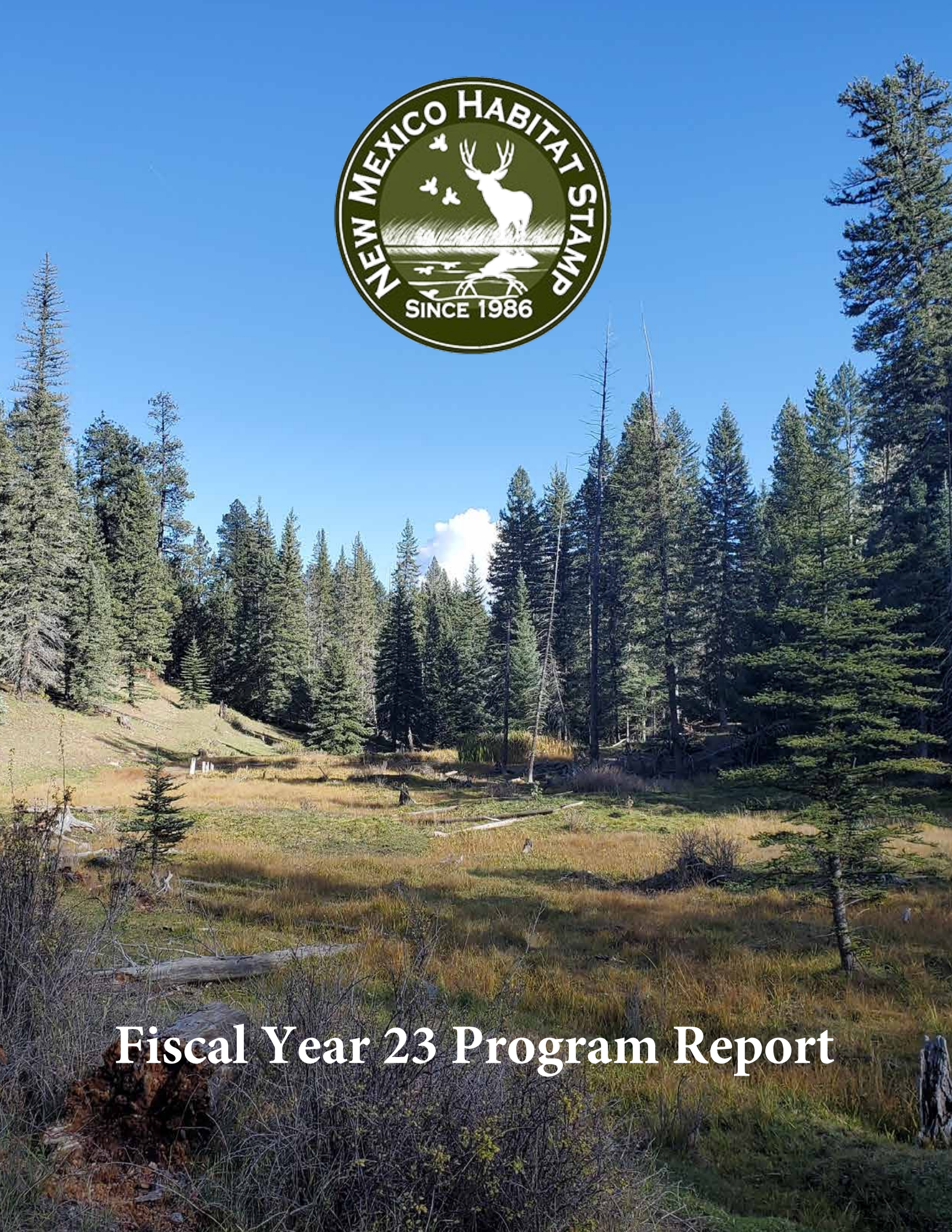


Fiscal Year 23 Program Report

Overview

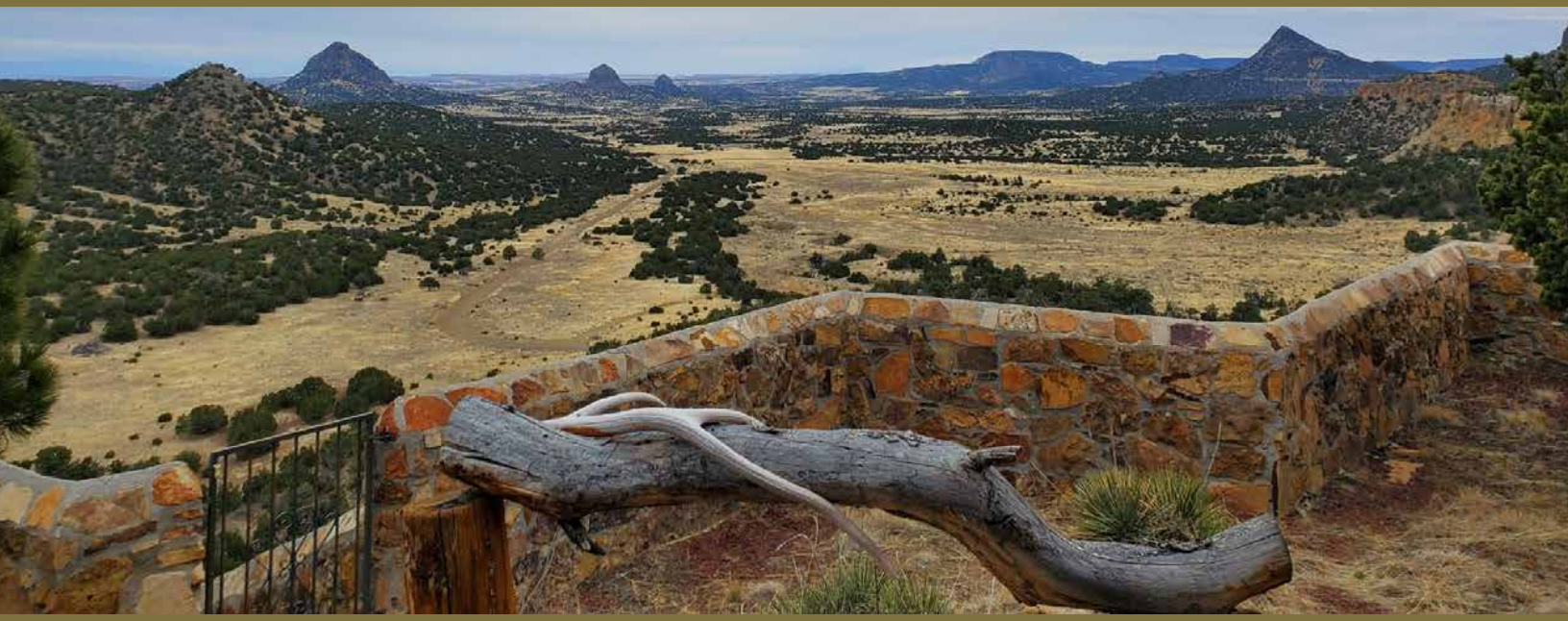
The Habitat Stamp Program (HSP) is a collaboration between the United States Forest Service (USFS), the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), and the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish (NMDGF). Through the HSP, under authority by the Sikes Act (16 USC 670a), state funding collected through the Public Land User Stamp (NMAC 19.34.6) is contributed to a variety of habitat restoration and conservation activities that take place upon federal public lands.

The NMDGF utilized budget authority provided by the New Mexico State Legislature to make available $4,000,000 via the HSP for habitat restoration projects during a public meeting in November of 2021 and during a second public meeting in July of 2022. This report is intended to provide information about the expenditures of these funds and provide results of the projects that were funded by the HSP as a result of those two public meetings.

In total, 18 projects were funded by the HSP between November of 2021 and October of 2023. A majority (12) of the projects are complete. The remaining (6) projects are currently being implemented, and will be complete by the end of 2023.

The next project cycle will begin with a public meeting in the early Spring (February/March of 2024) for initial discussions where federal and state restoration managers will present initial project concepts to the Citizen Advisory Committee (CAC) in order to receive advice and guidance on what types of projects should be further developed for the public meeting in August of 2024.

For additional details on program structure, please visit https://www.wildlife.state.nm.us/conservation/habitat-stamp/



LBar Wildlife Management Area

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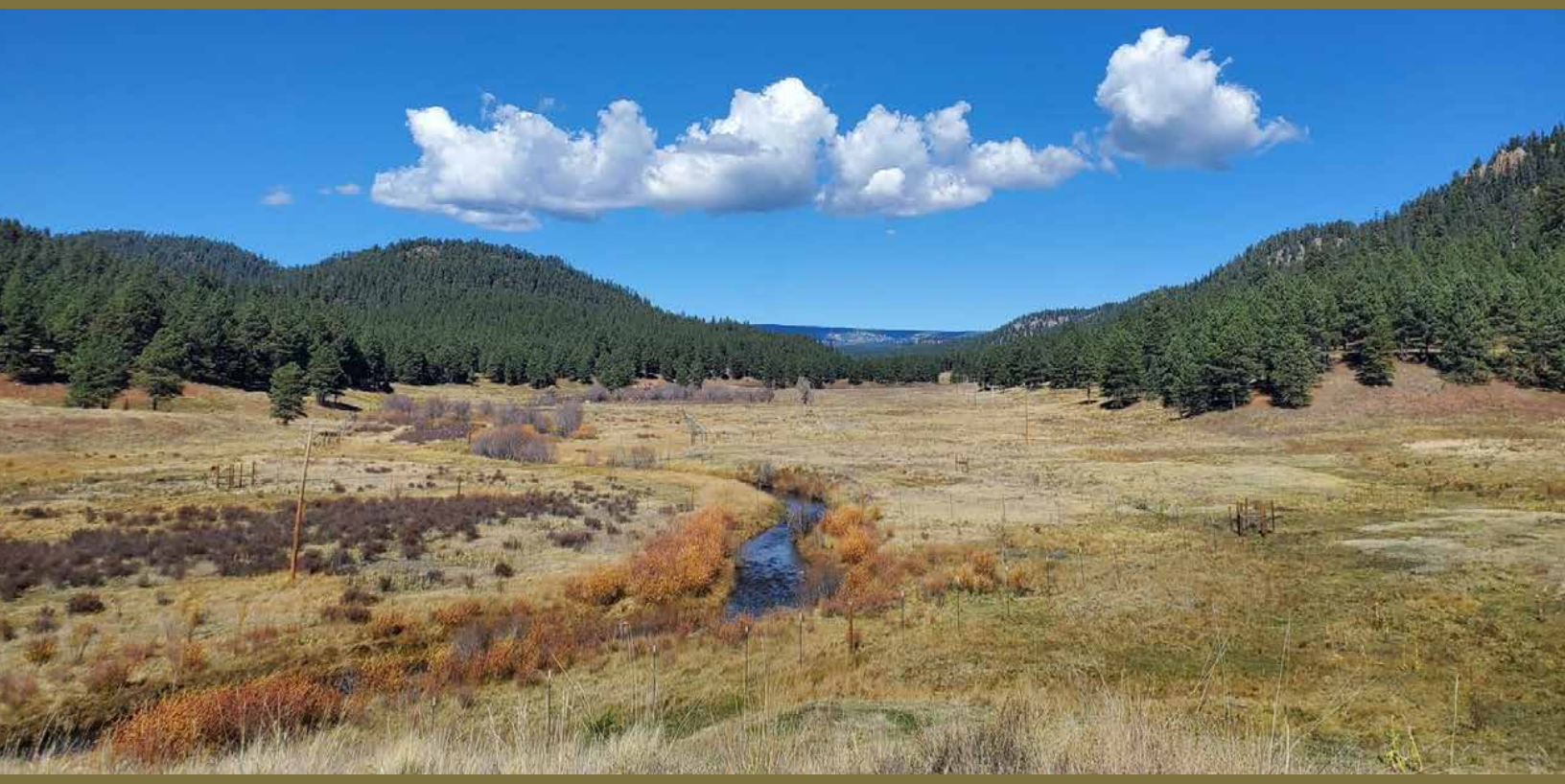
FY22 Fish Project Allocation, Special Meeting November 2021

In November of 2021, the State Game Commission made available $2,500,000 through the HSP, specifically for projects that benefit fish. The intention of this allocation was to make progress towards accomplishing the new rule requirement that 50% of all HSP restoration project funds be spent on projects that benefit fish. Prioritized projects were to be implemented between November of 2021 and June of 2025.

The following list of projects was presented to the CAC, who then voted to prioritize the projects during a public meeting. At this meeting, significant discussion took place in regard to the Polvadera project, and the CAC ultimately decided to remove it from consideration by a unanimous vote.

Project Name	Estimated Budget	Priority
Willow Creek	$1,000,000	1
Costilla River and Comanche Creek	$800,000	1
Rio Hondo Tribs	$100,000	1
Upper Rio San Antonio/ Lagunitas	$280,000	1
Chihuhuenos Creek	$133,000	2
Rio San Antonio	$150,000	2
~~Polvadera~~ REMOVED BY CAC	~~$150,000~~	0



Rio De Las Vacas, a project being developed for the 2025 project cycle

Willow Creek Restoration Project

The Willow Creek watershed and project area is located on the northwest side of the Gila Wilderness within the Gila National Forest. Willow Creek is a tributary to the Middle Fork Gila River. The watershed was historically dominated by mixed conifer spruce stands and ponderosa pine forests. However, the Whitewater Baldy Complex Fire in 2012 burned at high severity across much of the watershed within and above the project area. The channel type was historically a series of riffles and pools with a cobble substrate. Fire and ungulate impacts have resulted in a channel characterized by finer substrate and homogenous channel features with few pools.

This project is scheduled for implementation in the Fall of 2023. The project includes mitigation measures to improve stream health, and significantly improve fish habitat throughout seven miles of stream. This is part of a larger watershed restoration project which includes projects in other portions of the stream, and includes partners such as Trout Unlimited and the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation.

View of Willow Creek post Whitewater Baldy Wildfire

Rio Costilla Restoration Project

The Costilla Restoration project is designed to complete ongoing Rio Grande cutthroat trout habitat improvements along the stream. The project is currently out for bid, and will be implemented this Fall. Mobilization is expected to begin in October of 2023, with the project being wrapped up by early November of 2023.

The project includes the development of pool habitat, bank stabilization, and rock structures to significantly improve Rio Grande cutthroat trout habitat, and provide connectivity to already completed work that is further downstream. This project will drastically improve over-winter habitat for Rio Grande cutthroat trout.

The Valle Vidal is a high use recreation area and fishing opportunities will be improved with the completion of this project.

Overview of Rio Costilla in the Valle Vidal

Comanche Creek Restoration Project

The Comanche Creek restoration project was implemented in August of 2022. Restoration efforts included building rock structures, shallow pools, and erosion control features within the stream channel and side drainages to reduce flow intensity and improve fish habitat. This project was one component of the Rio Costilla and Comanche Creek CAC prioritized project.

This project is a piece of a larger effort that has taken place within the greater Valle Vidal watershed over the past 10 years. The work that has been accomplished has served to significantly improve high elevation stream and sloped wetland function, which has resulted in significantly improved habitat for both wildlife and Rio Grande cutthroat trout.

Completed in-stream rock structures on Comanche Creek

San Antonio Creek Project

The San Antonio Creek project was implemented in two mobilizations, one in January of 2022, and the other in July/August of 2022. The project was developed to improve riparian and aquatic habitat by planting willows, constructing livestock exclosures, and installing Beaver Dam Analogs along the creek. These efforts will provide armoring against erosion and create shade to help lower water temperatures for trout and other aquatic species. This project took place over approximately two miles of San Antonio Creek.

This project will be monitored over time. Once the willows are of a sufficient size and age to be capable of sustaining browse, the exclosures will be removed and potentially re-built in new areas, where more plantings and restoration work can occur. This phased approach will allow for an adaptive management model to be developed for restoration work throughout the length of San Antonio Creek.

Newly planted willows and fencing exclosure along San Antonio Creek

Upper San Antonio / Lagunitas Restoration Project

The Upper San Antonio / Lagunitas restoration project is designed to benefit Rio Grande cutthroat trout. The project is underway, with completion anticipated in late October of 2023.

Without active intervention, the impaired headwaters and degraded stream health of the Rio San Antonio risks a permanent degradation of fish habitat in much of the stream. At present, the Rio San Antonio still supports native Rio Grande cutthroat trout, which occupy less than 10% of their historic range. Projects like this one are aimed at enhancing the existing habitat and improving the adjacent marginal habitat for Rio Grande cutthroat trout. Trout Unlimited is a partner in this project.

Using a variety of techniques, this project is designed to decrease the width to depth ratio of the stream, provide coldwater refuge habitat for trout, increase stream shading, increase the water table and baseflow, and reconnect and re-wet adjacent wetlands.

Restoration work in progress along Upper Rio San Antonio / Lagunitas

November 2021 Fish Project Summary

$2,500,000 of HSP funds were available for these fish projects. Of the originally prioritized projects, the Chihuahuenos and Rio Hondo Tribs projects were canceled due to unforeseen complications.

The Chihuahuenos Creek restoration project was delayed due to logistical problems, and has been pushed back to an implementation date of 2024 at the very earliest.

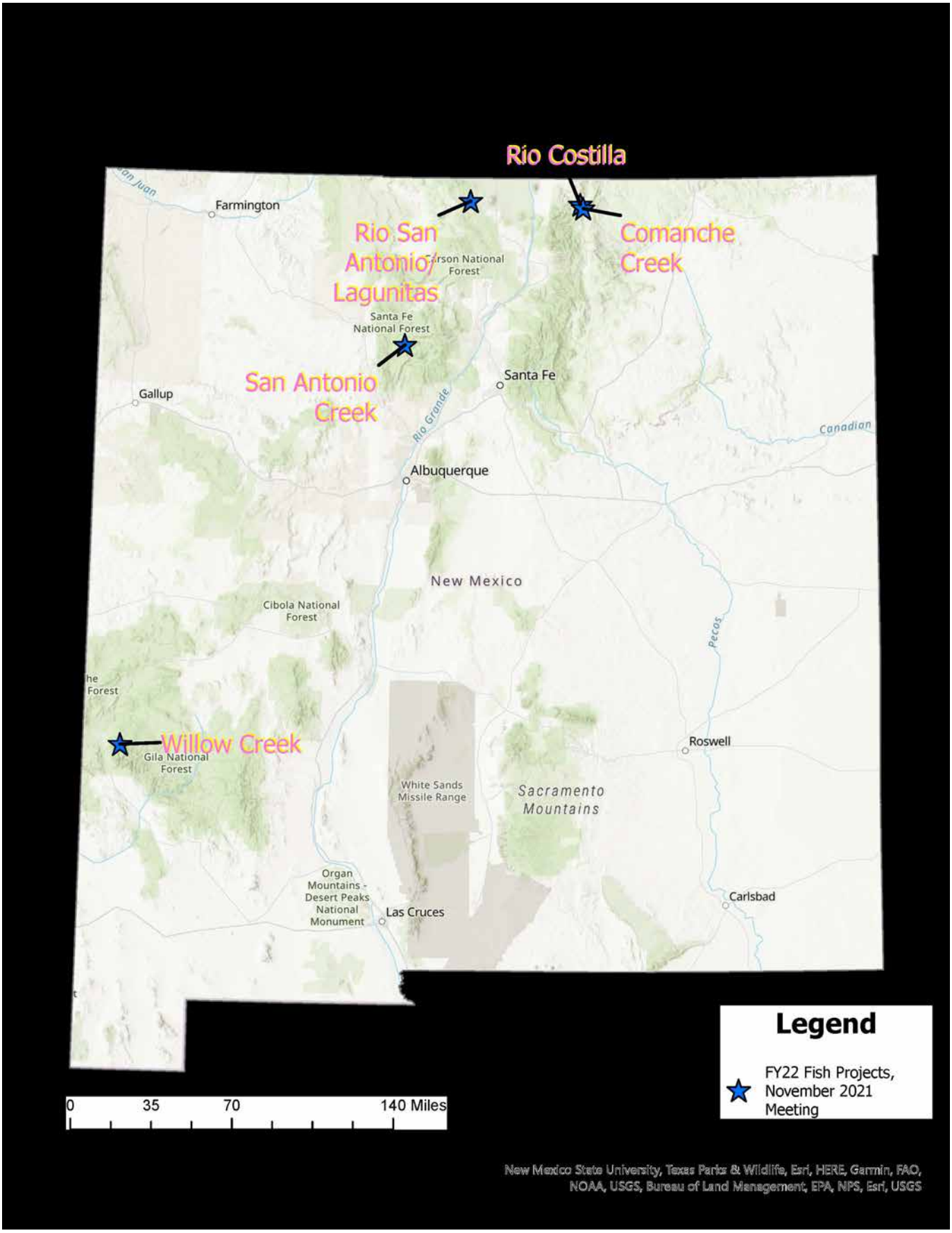
The Rio Hondo Tribs project also encountered logistical problems that have not been resolved, with no probable implementation window in the foreseeable future.

Both of these projects are of significant benefit to fish, and we plan to bring these forward for CAC consideration at future public meetings, when the logistical issues have been resolved.

Below, is a table showing the current status of projects that were prioritized in November of 2021.

Project Name	2021 Estimate	Final Cost	Project Status
Willow Creek	$1,000,000.00	$1,329,259.38	Currently in progress, completion expected by December 2023
Costilla River	$500,000.00	$551,043.13	Currently in progress, completion expected by December 2023
Comanche Creek	$300,000.00	$157,497.49	Completed
Rio Hondo Tribs	$100,000.00	$0.00	Project delayed, post prioritization meeting. See text above table.
Rio San Antonio	$280,000.00	$303,275.00	In final stages of implementation, will be complete by end of Octover 2023
Chihuahuenos	$133,000.00	$0.00	Project delayed, post prioritization meeting. See text above table.
San Antonio Creek	$150,000.00	$158,925.00	Completed

FY22 Fish Project Locations



FY23 HSP Project Allocation, Regular Meeting

In August of 2022, The State Game Commission made available an additional $1,500,000 through the HSP for fish and wildlife habitat restoration projects. HSP collaborators presented new project opportunities to the CAC at a public meeting, during which, the CAC voted on a final prioritized list of projects.

Project Name	Priority	Budget Estimate
Whitewater Creek Engineered Designs	1	$100,000
Rio Bonito Engineered Designs	2	$100,000
La Jara Wetland Restoration	3	$300,000
Little Hatchet Mountains Habitat Connectivity	4	$43,000
Grindstone Riparian Habitat Improvement	5	$30,000
Bear Wallow Park Springs Habitat conservation	6	$100,000
Carlsbad Natural Springs	7	$125,000
Statewide Water Renovations	8	$120,000
Conoco Lake	9	$34,000
Brokeoff Mountain Habitat Connectivity	10	$100,000
Macho Landscape Habitat Connectivity	11	$125,000
Taos Plateau Habitat Connectivity	12	$120,000
Shush Ken Fen	13	$136,000
Mertz Ranch Ponderosa Thinning	14	$150,000
Reserve Ranger District Firescape Planning	15	$150,000
Black Mesa Habitat Restoration	16	$150,000
IC Grant Forest Monitoring	17	$125,000
Seven Springs Landscape Restoration	18	$150,000
Cebolla Creek Habitat Conservation	X	X

During the meeting, the CAC voted to remove the Cebolla Creek project from consideration.

Postponed Projects

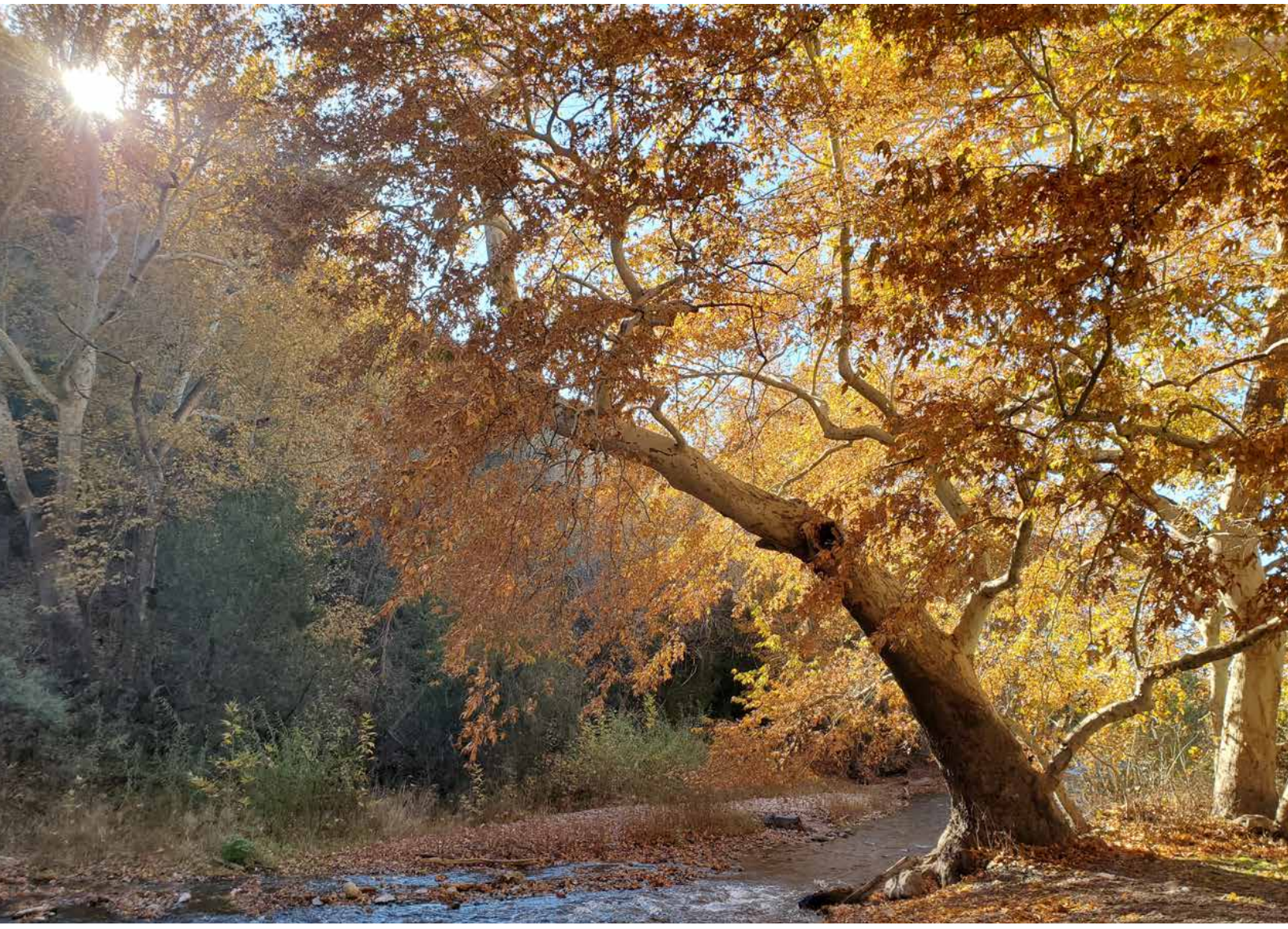
- **#5 Grindstone** - This project was delayed due to logistical and design issues. The project will be re-packaged into a larger landscape scale effort that will be brought forward for CAC consideration next funding cycle.
- **#7 Carlsbad Natural Springs** - This project was postponed due to logistical issues with the BLM requested design of the pipe fence.
- **#14 Mertz Ranch Ponderosa Thinning** - This project was impacted by the departure of several key staff in the Rio Puerco BLM. This project will be brought forward for CAC consideration next funding cycle.
- **#17 IC Grant Forest Monitoring** - This project was impacted by the departure of several key staff in the Rio Puerco BLM.
- **#18 Seven Springs Landscape Restoration** - This project was impacted by the departure of several key staff on the Santa Fe National Forest.

Whitewater Creek Restoration Project Design Engineering

The Whitewater Creek design project funds the development of conceptual and final engineered design plans for Gila cutthroat trout focused habitat restoration on up to a mile and a half of creek flowing near the Catwalk Recreation Area, northeast of Glenwood, NM. The final project seeks to improve in-stream habitat for Gila Cutthroat Trout and increase angling opportunity.

As of October of 2023, conceptual designs are complete. Completion of the final engineered design plans is anticipated by the end of the 2023 calendar year.

The NMDGF and the Gila National Forest anticipate bringing this fully developed restoration project to the CAC for their review and consideration at the regularly scheduled meeting during the second half of 2024.



Whitewater Creek as it flows through the Gila National Forest

Rio Bonito Restoration Project Design Engineering

The Rio Bonito design project funds the development of conceptual and final engineered design plans for aquatic habitat restoration on up to a mile and a half of the creek flowing through publicly accessible BLM managed land, east of Fort Stanton, NM. The final project seeks to improve in-stream habitat for rainbow trout and increase angling opportunity. In addition, the project will result in enhanced access for fisheries management staff to stock these reaches with rainbow trout.

As of October of 2023, conceptual designs are complete. Completion of the final engineered design plans is anticipated by the end of the 2023 calendar year.

The NMDGF and the Roswell Field Office of the BLM anticipate bringing this fully developed restoration project to the CAC for their review and consideration at the regularly scheduled meeting during the second half of 2024.

Rio Bonito as is flows through lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management

La Jara Wetland Restoration

The La Jara Wetland project is located in an important watershed at the headwaters of the Rio Grande. The valley bottom contains several miles of wet meadow and wetland habitats. These wetlands provide water and habitat for a variety of wildlife including elk, mule deer, and wild turkey.

The watershed has been negatively impacted by drought, historic livestock grazing practices, and other management issues, resulting in an incised and poorly functioning wetland system.

This project was the final step of a multi-year restoration project on the Rio Fernando that began in 2019. Objectives of the La Jara Wetlands restoration project focused on reconnecting the channel with the historic floodplain, improving wetland function, and increasing water levels in the Rio Fernando de Taos. This project was successfully completed in November of 2022.

La Jara Wetlands, Carson National Forest

Little Hatchet Mountains Habitat Connectivity

The Little Hatchet Mountains habitat connectivity project was aimed at removing a "double fence" wildlife barrier. The fence removal project was designed to primarily benefit bighorn sheep, as well as mule deer. This project was completed in January of 2023.

This project was designed to allow easier passage for wildlife, particularly desert bighorn sheep and mule deer, in a portion of the Little Hatchets Mountains near Hachita, NM. Two barbed wire fences spaced one foot apart, along a six mile stretch of fence line, created a barrier to big game movement. Desert bighorn sheep had become entangled in sections of this fence.

To increase habitat connectivity for wildlife, the older of the two fences was completely removed. The remaining fence was converted using wildlife friendly fencing specifications.

Completed wildlife friendly fence design, Little Hatchet Mountains

Bear Wallow Park Springs Habitat Conservation

The Bear Wallow Park Springs habitat conservation project was designed to benefit elk, wild turkey, and a variety of other wildlife species by constructing a wildlife friendly pipe fence around approximately five acres of the spring complex. This project was completed in October of 2022.

This project was designed to protect the sensitive wetlands of Bear Wallow Park Springs from cattle grazing pressure, allowing the vegetation and hydrological function of the springs to recover. The pipe and cable fence will require far less maintenance than the previous dilapidated barbed wire fence.

Elk within the Bear Wallow Springs pipe fence enclosure, which can be seen in the background

Statewide Water Renovations

The maintenance of federal wildlife water infrastructure has been a topic of discussion for the CAC over the past three years. This project was the subject of conversations during the CAC Prioritization Meeting in August of 2022, and was modified by formal CAC vote in a number of ways. Primarily, by reducing the total number of renovations that would be performed as part of this project.

The NMDGF hired a contractor in the first half of 2023 to renovate the Candy Well trick tank on the Quemado Ranger District of the Gila National Forest, and to purchase and deliver all of the necessary materials for rebuilding a Fort Stanton wildlife water (storage tank, drinker box, etc) to the Roswell BLM.

Both of these projects will help to provide water for wildlife in areas of the state with very limited perennial surface water.

Wildlife water catchment

Conoco Lake

Local Lagoon (Conoco Lake) is an oasis in the desert managed by the BLM. Catfish, bass, mule deer, javelina, ducks and other wildlife rely on this area for year-round water and habitat. This project was designed to improve habitat for fish and wildlife, and also to reduce erosion issues around this water feature.

In the first half of 2023, the road surface around the lake was filled to reduce damage and erosion from the road surface to the lake. Access trails through the banks of Local Lagoon were cleared to provide anglers better and easier access to and around the lake. Approximately 40 cottonwood cuttings were planted in the project area to provide future shade, and cattails were cut and removed from the lake to increase open water habitat.

Conoco Lake, Carlsbad BLM

Brokeoff Mountains Habitat Connectivity

The Brokeoff Mountains net-wire fence removal project was designed to benefit mule deer and other wildlife in the area by removing 11 miles of net-wire fence. The Brokeoff Mountains are a very remote and rugged section of mountain chain to the west of the Guadalupe National Park. The BLM manages most of the acreage in this area, and mule deer and Barbary sheep hunting are popular. This project was completed in June of 2023.

This project was designed to allow wildlife easier passage. Historically, these mountains were managed as sheep grazing allotments, which led to the construction of several net-wire pasture fences. Net-wire is a barrier for sub adult ungulates, such as mule deer fawns and Barbary sheep lambs. By removing the fence, wildlife are now able to transverse across the habitat easier, access more water, and escape from predators quicker.

Brokeoff Mountains, southeastern New Mexico

Macho Landscape Big Game Habitat Connectivity

Restoration efforts within the Macho Landscape of the Roswell BLM over the past 17 years have focused on removing net-wire fence, which acts as a barrier that limits the movement and distribution of pronghorn, Barbary sheep lambs, and mule deer fawns across this landscape.

The Macho Project was designed to benefit pronghorn and other wildlife in the area by removing net-wire and replacing it with wildlife friendly four-strand wire fence.

As part of this phase of the project, HSP paid to modify approximately seven miles of net-wire fence to a wildlife-friendly design. The Macho Area is just North of Roswell, NM and provides good opportunities for pronghorn, mule deer and Barbary sheep hunting.

Pronghorn pass under a wildlife friendly fence, Macho Landscape, Roswell BLM

Taos Plateau Big Game Habitat Connectivity Project

For several years, the Taos BLM and partners have systematically removed sections of net-wire fencing throughout the Taos Plateau. This current collaborative project utilized HSP funds to remove six miles of net-wire fence and replace it with wildlife friendly four-strand fence.

The Taos Plateau is part of a large migration corridor for large ungulates such as mule deer, elk and pronghorn. The presence of net-wire fencing in such corridors can significantly impede the ability of wildlife to safely and efficiently move within and amongst high quality habitats. Wildlife population health can decline as a result.

This project has resulted in the immediate improvement of wildlife movement across what was previously a barrier to pronghorn, elk calf, and mule deer fawn movement. There are many additional miles of net-wire on the Taos Plateau that have been identified for replacement with wildlife friendly fence. This overall effort will have many phases of implementation, but each chunk and segment of net-wire fence that is modified into wildlife friendly fence is improving wildlife habitat connectivity at larger spatial scales.

Elk herd, Taos Plateau

Shush Ken Fen

The Shush Ken Fen is a rare and unique wetland feature located in the Zuni Mountains on the Cibola National Forest. Over time, through poor management and land practices, vegetation conditions and hydrological conditions of the fen became severely degraded.

This project was designed to conserve the fen from livestock grazing impacts by constructing a pipe fence around the perimeter. After this project was prioritized by the CAC another partner came forward. Bat Conservation International approached the partnership and agreed to construct a pipe fence around the fen itself. The HSP funded the construction of two smaller pipe fence enclosures around the two directly adjacent springs that feed into the Shush Ken Fen complex and installed two cattle-guards to enable the USFS to effectively manage livestock grazing moving forward. The partnership with Bat Conservation International brought significant outside funding to this project, resulting in a significant reduction to the cost of this project for the HSP.

The completion of this project will significantly improve the availability of water and forage for wildlife within this landscape.

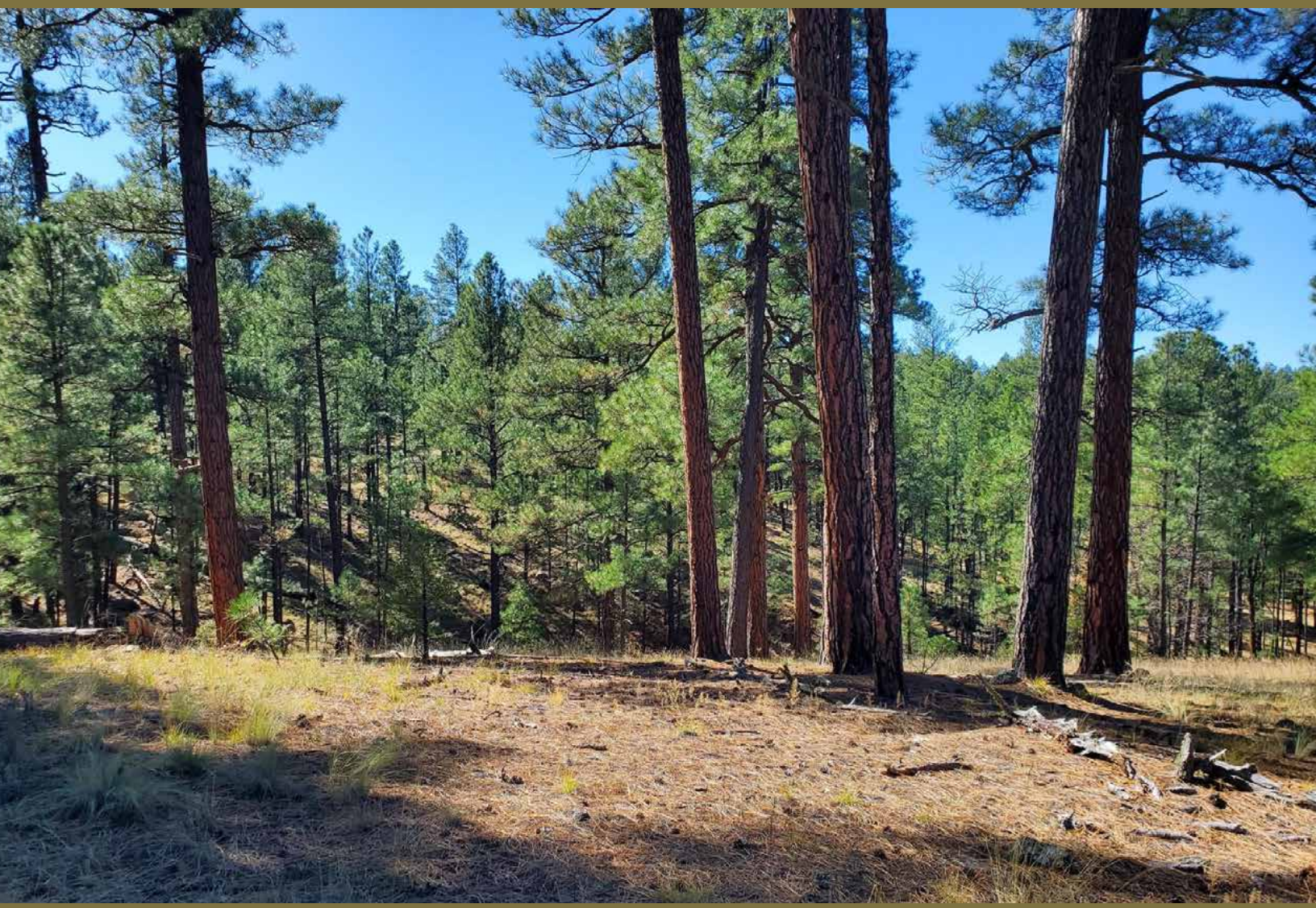
Shush Ken Fen, Zuni Mountains, Cibola National Forest

Reserve Ranger District Firescape Planning

The Eagle Peak Landscape encompasses nearly 70,000 acres of forested habitat on the Reserve Ranger district of the Gila National Forest. Historically, this landscape supported a "frequent fire" disturbance model, meaning that mostly low intensity wildfire naturally occurred in patches across the landscape on the order of every 5-20 years. This frequency served to maintain forest habitat by clearing away brush, woody under-story, and dead and down trees, while also improving the quality, health, and vigor of grasses, forbes, and browse plants.

Over the past two centuries, through the effects of land management actions and wildfire suppression, forests have become overgrown, less diverse, and less likely to escape the habitat destruction associated with catastrophic wildfire.

The HSP will help to fund the development of an Environmental Assessment (EA). This EA will serve to complete the NEPA portion of the compliance work necessary before active restoration, including thinning and prescribed fire, can take place. The anticipated completion date for the EA is the Spring of 2024. Once the EA is complete, the NMDGF and the Gila National Forest anticipate designing projects within this landscape for CAC consideration and prioritization in the 2025 HSP project cycle.



Eagle Peak Landscape, Gila National Forest

Black Mesa Habitat Restoration Project

The Black Mesa area of the Cibola National Forest sits between the IC grant of the Rio Puerco BLM to the north, and the newly acquired LBar Wildlife Management Area of the NMDGF to the south. The Rio Puerco BLM and the Cibola National Forest have partnered with the NMDGF in restoration efforts throughout this landscape. Thousands of acres of ponderosa pine forest have been collaboratively thinned in an effort to reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire, restore wildlife habitat, and allow for prescribed fire use as a management tool.

150 acres of forest were thinned using HSP funds during this project cycle. A project to thin an additional 700 acres of forest was presented to the CAC during the FY24 regular meeting. The project was prioritized for HSP funding, and implementation will occur in the Spring of 2024.

This project has significantly improved the wildlife habitat on Black Mesa, and has facilitated the ability for the Mt. Taylor Ranger district to move closer towards managing this landscape with optimally planned intervals of broadcast prescribed fire.

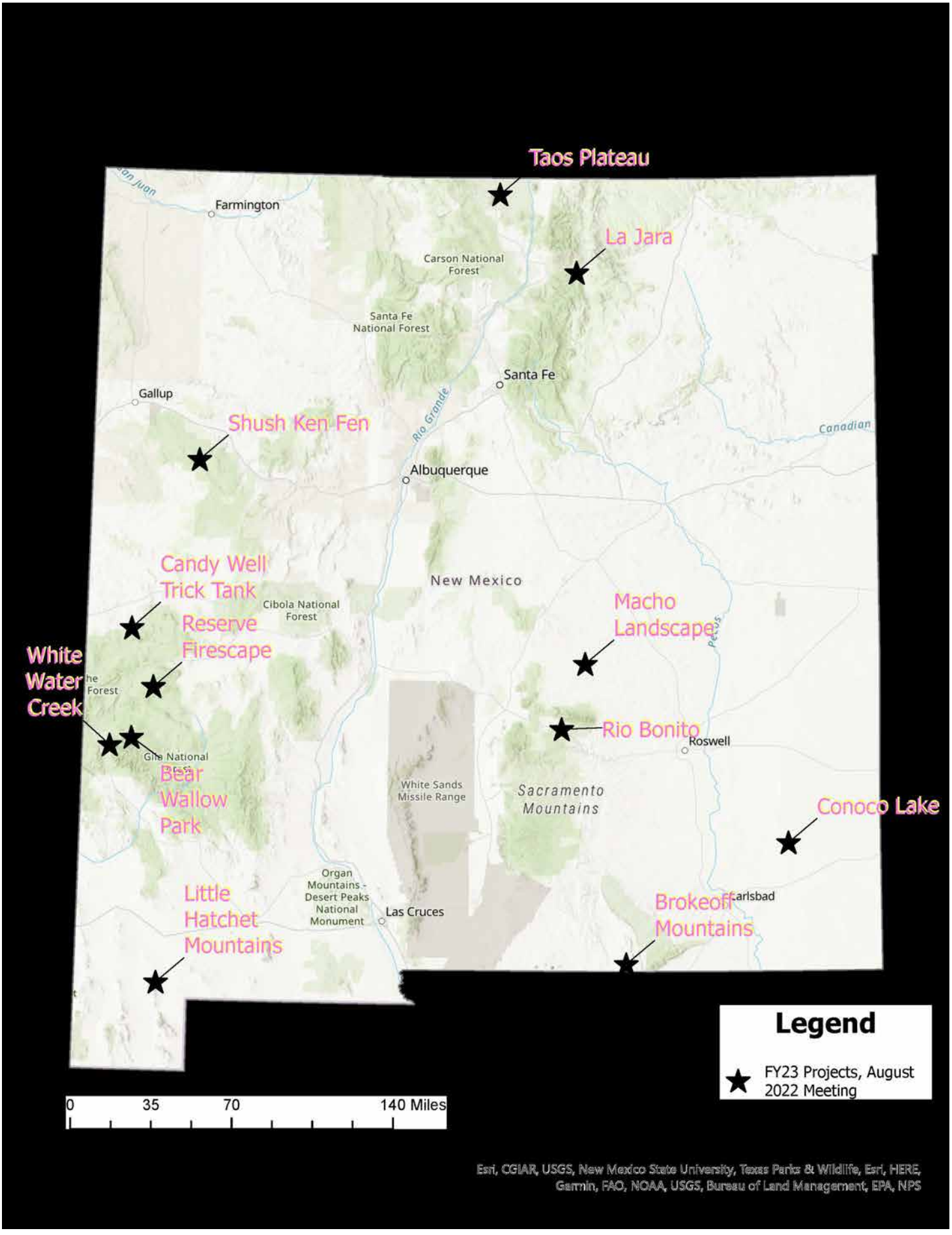
Ponderosa Pine Forest Stand, Cibola National Forest

FY23 Project Summary

Five projects were canceled or postponed as they became logistically impossible to implement. These projects will remain on the shelf until such a time that they are ready to be implemented and can be considered for implementation using HSP funds. Other projects on this list were possible to implement at significant savings to original estimates. $1,500,000 of HSP funding was available for these projects. $204,990 in available HSP budget was not expended in this cycle, those funds will be made available again in future funding cycles.

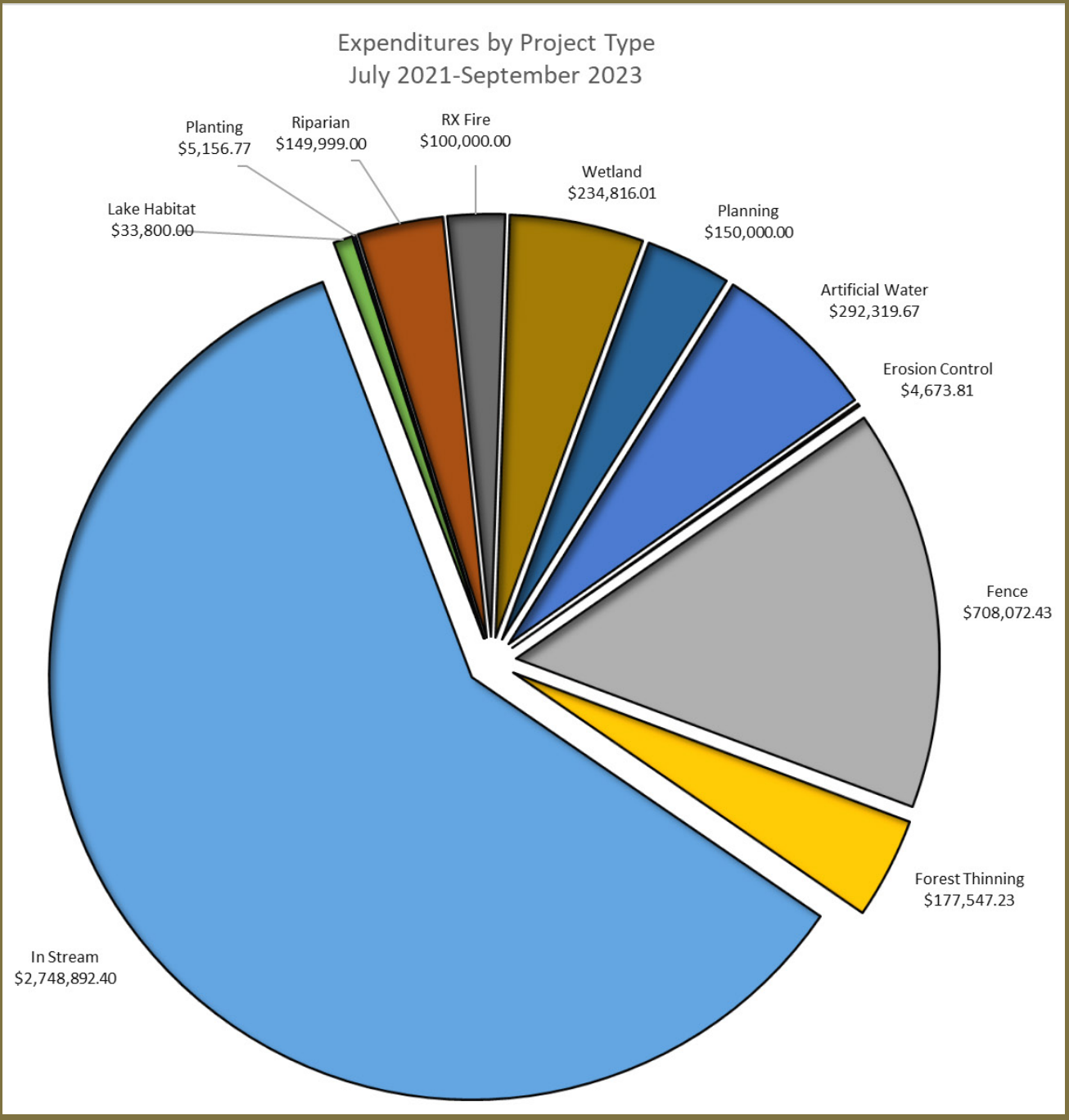
Project Name	2022 Estimate	Final Cost	Project Status
Whitewater Creek Engineered Designs	$100,000	$39,157.70	Received Conceptual Designs, Awaiting Final Designs
Rio Bonito Engineered Designs	$100,000	$45,606.70	Received Conceptual Designs, Awaiting Final Designs
La Jara Wetland Restoration	$300,000	$234,816.01	Complete
Little Hatchet Mountains Habitat Connectivity	$43,000	$45,112.70	Complete
Grindstone Riparian Habitat Improvement	$30,000	$0.00	Project delayed, post prioritization meeting. See page 11.
Bear Wallow Park Springs Habitat conservation	$100,000	$92,135.73	Complete
Carlsbad Natural Springs	$125,000	$0.00	Project delayed, post prioritization meeting. See page 11.
Statewide Water Renovations	$120,000	$125,493.29	Complete
Conoco Lake	$34,000	$33,800.00	Complete
Brokeoff Mountain Habitat Connectivity	$100,000	$108,039.92	Complete
Macho Landscape Habitat Connectivity	$125,000	$154,300.53	Complete
Taos Plateau Habitat Connectivity	$120,000	$131,737.92	Complete
Shush Ken Fen	$136,000	$75,785.63	Complete
Mertz Ranch Ponderosa Thinning	$150,000	$0.00	Project delayed, post prioritization meeting. See page 11.
Reserve Ranger District Firescape Planning	$150,000	$150,000.00	In Progress
Black Mesa Habitat Restoration	$150,000	$59,023.40	Complete
IC Grant Forest Monitoring	$125,000	$0.00	Project delayed, post prioritization meeting. See page 11.
Seven Springs Landscape Restoration	$150,000	$0.00	Project delayed, post prioritization meeting. See page 11.

FY23 Project Locations



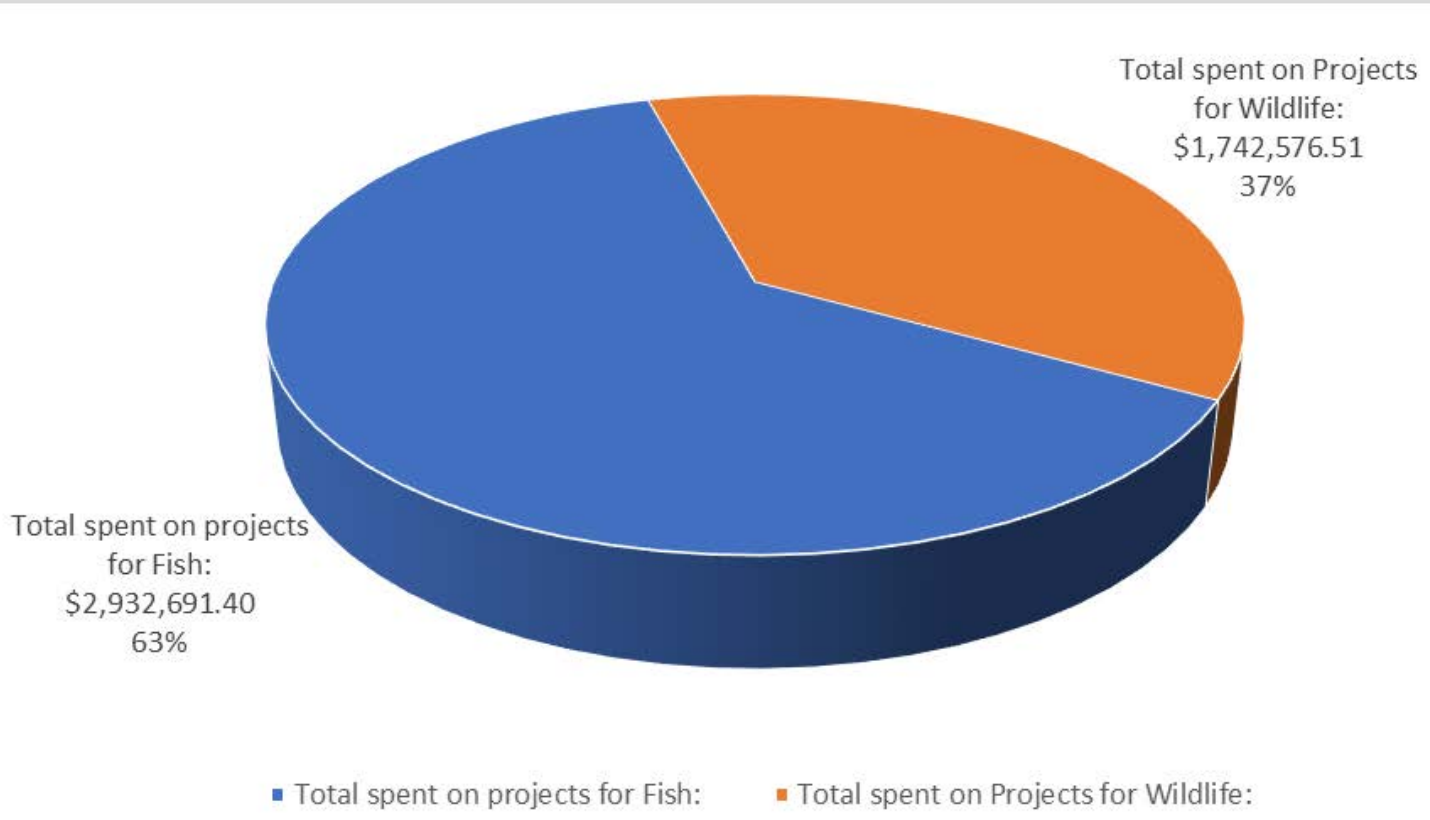
Project Expenditures as a Result of Presently Appointed CAC Priority Ranks

The current CAC was appointed in April of 2021. Since that appointment, following CAC priority ranks of HSP projects, the following chart depicts how HSP funds have been spent in accordance to project categories. In total, between July of 2021 and September of 2023, $4,675,268 in HSP funds has been expended on habitat restoration projects throughout New Mexico.



HSP Expenditures on Fish Projects

In the current 5 year review period from April of 2021 through March of 2026, $2,932,691.40 in HSP funds has been expended on projects that benefit fish. This amounts to 63% of HSP project expenditures during this period.



As a projection, it is anticipated that the FY24 funding cycle will have a similar proportion of Fish Project expenditures, resulting in ~63% of HSP expenditures during the 5 year period going to projects that benefit fish.

FY24 Projection	
Total HSP Funds Spent:	$6,175,268
Total spent on Projects for Fish:	$3,918,691.40
Total Spent on Projects for Wildlife	$2,256,576.51
% spent on Fish Projects:	63.46%

This is a projection of FY24 (July 2023 - June 2024) project expenditures in addition to expenditures beginning in July of 2021.

An updated accounting of fish project expenditures will be provided at the HSP update meeting to be held in February/ March of 2024.

Acknowledgments

The implementation of these projects would not be possible without the hard work and dedication of the nine Citizen Advisors who volunteer significant time and resources to evaluating project opportunities and providing citizen advice to the agencies. On behalf of the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish, we extend a sincere thanks to the following individuals that are on that Committee:

Jeff Arterburn

James Cain

Dave Heft

Charles Hibner

Laura Naranjo

John Pearce

Nick Streit

Ray Trejo

Art Vollmer

And to the Hunters and Anglers that the CAC represents, who contribute to the HSP by purchasing the Habitat Stamp, we thank you for your dedication to fish and wildlife habitat conservation.