

**PRESIDENTIAL MIGRATORY BIRD
FEDERAL STEWARDSHIP AWARD NOMINATION**

1. **Applicant:** US Department of the Interior, Bureau of Land Management-New Mexico
2. **Co-applicants:** US Department of Agriculture, Natural Resources Conservation Service
3. **Action:** In 2005, the BLM began what has come to be known as “Restore New Mexico”. The goal of this effort is to restore degraded and fragmented habitats, impaired watersheds and native vegetation on a landscape basis through an aggressive partnership approach for wildlife and other benefits. What began as a concept has expanded into a significant and regionally important restoration and reclamation program involving numerous Federal and State agencies, conservation organizations, industry groups, and private landowners – over 300 different partners have participated in the effort thus far. And the results have exceeded our expectations: to date, about 1.8 million acres of degraded land and impaired watersheds have been treated and is either restored to a more natural condition or in the process of doing so.

This effort was not initially without its skeptics. Within the BLM-NM field offices, the concept of restoring NM landscapes seemed daunting given the normal workload, targets, and staffing levels. But management’s constant mantra of “Git R’ Done” combined with innovations such as the use of GIS to inform treatment decisions and map progress, and several initial successes encouraged partners to join us. This turned initial concerns into enthusiastic support for a new way of doing business. It became clear, early in the process that many employees were longing to be better stewards of the land and resources and this initiative is now a source of pride and accomplishment. Through the use of technology, interdisciplinary teams, and strong partnerships, Restore New Mexico is going strong as it moves into its 7th year with no end in sight.

Landscape restoration in New Mexico is focused on controlling invasive brush species, initially with approved herbicides and follow-up treatments with prescribed fire, addressing woodland encroachment with prescribed fire and mechanical treatments, improving riparian habitats by removing salt cedar and restoring native habitat, and reclaiming orphaned and abandoned oil and gas well pads and infrastructure.

In all cases, the health of the land and the benefits to migratory birds and other wildlife cannot be overstated. For the past 100+ years a monoculture of creosote and mesquite, decadent and over stocked pinion/juniper woodlands, and degraded riparian areas dominated the New Mexico landscape. There are now almost two million acres of healthy, defragmented grasslands and woodland habitat and miles of healthy riparian areas.

These restorations efforts have had positive impacts on native wildlife and migratory birds throughout the state. In southern NM, the restored grasslands of the Chihuahuan Desert are important for the survival of a wide variety of migrating grassland birds. Wintertime brings migrating sparrows, pipits, longspurs and other birds to the grasslands of this region for safe haven to wait out the snows and cold temperatures of their northern breeding grounds. The treated pinyon-juniper woodlands now provide a mosaic pattern of healthy woodland habitat and a rich environment for migratory bird species. In the treated riparian habitats, the return of native trees, shrubs, and grasses, along with renewed perennial flows in some areas, is benefiting a variety of migrant, summer and permanent bird species. And finally, defragmenting habitat throughout the Permian and San Juan oil and gas basins has created

uninterrupted habitat blocks with reduced disturbances that birds are once again using for nesting, hiding, and foraging.

As restoration efforts proceed we have re-introduced and re-established extant populations of species including Aplomado falcon and wild turkey. In addition, we are securing and enhancing habitat for wildlife species that are on the State and Federal rare, candidate and/or listed species including lesser prairie chicken and Southwestern willow flycatcher.

The success of Restore NM has generated much interest from within the BLM, other agencies, non-governmental organizations, industries, and private landowners. The BLM's Healthy Lands Initiative was based, in large part, on the model and initial success of Restore New Mexico. Studies to verify the positive impact to the conservation of migratory birds are only now beginning to show tangible benefits. However, the healthier habitats, the pre- and post-monitoring being conducted, the scientific studies underway, and the application of adaptive management to assure positive outcomes for migratory birds all point to positive national and international benefits from the restoration and reclamation work of Restore New Mexico.

4. When was the action initiated? Restore New Mexico began in 2005

5. Does the action take place locally, regionally, nationally or internationally? Restore NM is a statewide initiative with regional, national and international impacts. Each restoration project undertaken by the initiative has immediate and direct benefits to local ecosystems. But since we're committed to conducting habitat restoration projects on a landscape scale, the benefits of these projects are seen regionally, especially with the migratory patterns of wildlife and overall watershed health. With migratory bird habitat restoration, the effects of restoring degraded grasslands, reducing invasive and encroaching woodlands, and improving impacted riparian areas to healthy, native, historic conditions have both local and far-reaching benefits which extend beyond our state to have both national and international effects.

As a southern border state, many of our migratory birds winter in Mexico or beyond, returning to New Mexico for their breeding season. Other migratory birds use the newly restored grasslands in southern New Mexico for their wintering grounds when their northern breeding grounds are under snow. With close to 2 million acres already treated and in a healthier state for migratory birds, Restore New Mexico is providing better habitat conditions and fewer disturbances for a wide variety of migratory birds visiting our state from elsewhere, including beyond the borders of the United States.

6. How does the action meet or exceed agency mandates or daily activities? The Restore NM initiative exceeds agency mandates and daily activities in several critical ways that have greatly contributed to the project's success.

- Scope of treatments: Rather than the small, site specific projects, as was the norm for the majority of BLM projects in the past, the Restore projects are designed in blocks of 200,000 – 300,000 acres providing positive benefits to entire landscapes and watersheds.
- Restoring and/or reclaiming habitat for wildlife regardless of surface ownership: This is a guiding principle of the initiative and is being accomplished with the help of the existing funding mechanisms such as the Wyden Amendment. The Amendment allows for the treatment of state *and* private lands as long as the treatment has positive benefits to public land.
- Efforts made to foster long-term partnerships and relationships with a diverse group of stakeholders: It is not uncommon for our large scale projects to have participants from all ends of the environmental spectrum – from conservation organizations, to energy companies, to private landowners to ranchers to state and federal agencies. Some are providing in-kind

contributions, others funding, and yet others, their land. In all cases, the focus remains on the positive outcomes that come from allowing the land to heal after treatment and return to a more natural condition that allows wildlife, including migratory birds, to thrive. The BLM has contributed approximately 10 to 12 million dollars and our partners have matched these funds nearly 2 to 1.

7. Explain how the action promotes or results in effective migratory bird conservation. The following specific actions from BLM-NM's four district offices highlight the migratory bird benefits that are being accomplished by the initiative:

- The Las Cruces District: The District has partnered with the USDA Agriculture Research Station – Jornada Experimental Range to establish scientific studies to quantify the effects of shrub control projects. Concurrently, breeding bird surveys are conducted within treated and control plots to document changes in grassland bird diversity and abundance. Recent data indicates Cassin's Sparrow, Scaled Quail, and Eastern Meadowlark saw significantly higher average total abundance in treated sites vs. reference sites, Western Kingbirds showed a positive relationship, and Northern Mockingbirds, Cactus Wrens, Mourning Doves, Black-throated Sparrows, and Ash-throated Flycatchers were abundant but were not indicative of the treatment or reference sites. The District is applying the results of these monitoring and scientific studies to inform, and thus improve, their future treatments including the addition of mitigation measures for select species.
- Farmington District Office: Bird monitoring studies to determine the number of avian species along specific routes within specific habitat types have been conducted for the past 10 years. These studies are now providing the baseline data that is being used for comparison following habitat improvement projects and vegetation treatments. As projects mature and more data is available, we are confident that increasing number and variety of migratory birds will see benefits from the restoration work.
- Pecos District Office: To measure the success of the Restore program, pre-and post-monitoring data is being compiled. Riparian avian surveys in salt cedar removal areas are showing an overall increase in avian diversity. Waterfowl and shorebird populations have also benefited from Restore treatments in the Pecos River Valley. Restore projects have increased the variety of grasses and shrubs preferred by migratory birds. Migratory bird species that have benefited from these efforts include black hawks, bald eagles, and their prey.
- Albuquerque District Office: Pre- and post-project monitoring has been initiated within priority landscape projects areas. As a result of the monitoring data, we have worked closely with the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish to develop and implement Best Management Practices (BMP's) to reduce impacts to species such as the gray vireo. BMP's specific to migratory birds now include total avoidance of certain high use areas to modification of thinning prescriptions.

8. Provide details that demonstrate how the action is innovative. BLM-New Mexico's efforts to improve habitat conditions for wildlife, including migratory birds, serves as a model for other land management agencies on how best to accomplish large scale restoration efforts that effectively treat not just isolated pockets of wildlife habitat but entire landscapes. In particular, our partnership-based model is innovative in its scope and effectiveness at treating and improving migratory bird habitat.

When considering how best to undertake projects to improve bird habitat, BLM-New Mexico and our partners work collaboratively on the ground to discover the best approach to effectively accomplish landscape scale restoration projects. Uninterested in who gets credit, we welcome any and all interested parties to work together to leverage resources for on-the-ground restoration projects. We've quickly discovered that when we rise above territorial issues and boundaries, we work far more effectively at accomplishing large scale restoration work.

Since 2005, BLM-New Mexico and our partners have treated over 1.8 million acres of impaired habitat, beginning the shift to healthy ecological conditions. We're committed to using science to verify the

benefits our restoration projects are having on wildlife, but we're also using common sense to guide us, instead of waiting years and years for the science to tell us what we already know: that treating historic grasslands and riparian areas overrun with invasive species allows healthy, native vegetation - and birds - to return.

In terms of effectiveness, two of the guiding philosophies behind the Restore New Mexico initiative is the commitment to science and to adaptive management. Every decision made is informed by the best scientific data available. With this in mind, every project undertaken - whether it's restoring shrub-infested landscapes to native grasslands, returning degraded riparian areas to healthy ecological conditions, thinning woodlands to reduce the risk of wildfire, or reintroducing wildlife to their native habitat - is driven by sound science. While confident that our Restore treatments are creating tremendous benefits for the land, the wildlife, and migratory birds, the use scientific data generated by monitoring and scientific studies is always used to inform our decisions. The benefit of this commitment to science allows us to continually learn from what we're doing so we can adapt our strategy and continue to improve the outcomes for migratory birds and other wildlife.

- 9. Describe the roles and responsibilities of partners.** Considering the natural diversity of New Mexico and the different types of restoration projects undertaken, the types of partners involved, as well as their roles and responsibilities vary considerably. Nevertheless, the amount of bird habitat we've restored would simply not have been possible without the contributions of our partners. Restore New Mexico has over 300 active partners working collaboratively and pooling resources, knowledge, skills and/or ideas to accomplish large-scale restoration projects throughout the state of New Mexico.

Many partners have made generous financial contributions, which have allowed us to find funding matches from other partners and agencies. The ranchers who work with BLM and NRCS to restore degraded grasslands agree to rest treated areas from grazing and agree to follow a Coordinated Resource Management Plan developed for their ranch. In addition to financial contributions, energy companies are implementing voluntary conservation measures and best management practices on their operations as it relates to conserving habitat for Federal Candidate Species. Wildlife and conservation groups are providing monetary contributions as well as institutional support to rally their members and other like-minded groups to support restoration projects on a scale that may not be possible without their support. In 2008 the BLM and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service pioneered the use of Cooperative Conservation Agreements on public lands in order to implement conservation measures for special status species and migratory birds. Thus far, oil & gas companies and ranchers have enrolled 2.1 million acres and contributed almost \$3,000,000 dollars for on-the-ground habitat improvement projects.

- 10. How might the action be transferrable to other sites managed by this or other federal agencies? Does the action contribute to a tangible need locally, regionally, nationally, or internationally? How is this being encouraged?** The Restore New Mexico project has already been transferred to other sites in the BLM through the development of the Healthy Lands Program. And because the treatments leading to restoration have occurred at the landscape or watershed level regardless of surface ownership, the project has a wide variety of supporters. The advocates of the Restore effort are spreading the word about the project to other areas for their implementation. For example, recently at a NRCS's Western State's Conservationists meeting, BLM-NM was asked to attend to present information about the program, the partnerships, and the funding mechanisms, because of an interest among the NRCS's State Conservationists to implement parts of the program to their home states.

The positive results achieved by Restore has also garnered the support and interest of numerous national organizations including Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, Wild Turkey Federation, The Nature Conservancy, Mule Deer Foundation, National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, National

Wildlife Federation, and others who are taking the concept of Restore and applying it to new areas or activities. These diverse groups help spread information and results about the project. Finally, BLM-NM regularly provides Restore New Mexico information by posting project information, results, and monitoring data on our website, creating a Restore newsletter, and attending conferences and meetings where presentations are given about the project.

11. How does the action impact your agency's current migratory bird conservation practices?

Specifically, the major impact of this project is the concept of treating habitats on a landscape scale instead of site specific projects. As a result of Restore New Mexico, the BLM implemented the Healthy Lands Program with direct ties to the Rapid Ecoregional Assessment Process and the Landscape Conservation Cooperative program, all of which are addressing landscape scale issues. Restore New Mexico has also lead to the use of enhanced technologies, new and improved techniques related to environmental analysis, wildlife and habitat monitoring and resource management on public lands. Cumulatively, these new ways of conducting business is having a significant positive impact on the status of migratory birds in New Mexico.

12. How does the action benefit migratory bird species of concern? Restore NM treatments have resulted in benefits for migratory bird species of concern. Some of the benefits include defragmenting grassland migratory bird habitat on a landscape scale and restoring critical wildlife corridors through riparian habitat treatments. Our efforts to address encroachment of woody species and deteriorating woodlands are benefitting woodland bird species as well.

For example, the Final Recovery Plan for the southwestern willow flycatcher (WIFL) calls for the conservation and enhancement of habitat quality for the WIFL and migratory birds in general. Thus far, monitoring shows a positive WIFL response to Restore projects such as weed control efforts, the removal of invasive non-native vegetation, and re-establishment of native riparian plants like native willows and cottonwoods. Data also indicates an upward trend in nesting attempts by the WIFL in treated areas and an overall increase in avian diversity, including migratory species such as the WIFL. The scale of the benefit to this special status species goes well beyond the treatment areas with potential national and international benefits.

We've also worked closely with the Peregrine Fund, the Turner Foundation, and US Fish and Wildlife Service to implement Restore treatments in conjunction with the release of Aplomado falcons at five locations in southwest New Mexico. Falcon surveys during the breeding season are being conducted in key habitats to assist in documenting successful recovery efforts for this federally listed species. Restore treatments can take credit for improved grasslands that support healthier prey base populations for the falcon.

Our Raptor and Special Status Species Protection Policy requires that a survey and biological report be prepared for projects. This effort allows us to identify areas where benefits can be realized or modify a project to avoid negative impacts. As a result, we have documented positive benefits for bald eagles and other raptors especially in treated riparian areas.

All of the Restore NM goals and prescriptions are designed to provide significant benefits to avian species of concern whenever possible. As we learn from the results of each passing year, we refine our efforts, developing and implementing mitigation measures when needed and expanding or duplicating projects with positive outcomes to assure the greatest benefit at the largest scale.