
RIO PEÑASCO

Large-Scale Watershed Restoration Partnership

Annual Report

I. Partnership Overview

The Rio Peñasco Partnership has grown into a community-based, collaborative group, working toward common goals for the watershed. Major issues being addressed by this partnership include: reducing catastrophic fire potential, increasing water quantity, and enhancing economic stability. The community is developing a partnership plan and has incorporated other local initiatives (such as Cloudcroft Area Sustainable Tourism), State and Federal land management agency plans.



The Vision of the Partnership is a productive community that provides many options for enjoying the lifestyle and customs of choice, while contributing to a robust economy within sustainable watershed conditions. A small, innovative industrial network has established new businesses to supplement stable, traditional businesses and has created markets for small-diameter woody material.

The Rio Peñasco is a 160,000-acre watershed that feeds the Pecos River and Tularosa Basin. Three quarters of the watershed is national forest land that surrounds Cloudcroft, High Rolls-Mountain Park, Mayhill, many subdivisions, and includes headwaters of the La Luz and Fresnal drainages. The watershed is home to a unique mix of rare plant, amphibian, insect and bird species that have special federal or state status. Over 370 species of animals (including 100 species of neo-tropical migratory birds) use the Rio Peñasco area. Plans are underway to expand this partnership to the Sacramento Mountains (450,000 acres) or the entire Lincoln National Forest (1.1 million acres).

II. Goals of the Rio Peñasco Partnership



Goals for the partnership are:

- ❖ Improve water yield and water quality
- ❖ Reduce fire hazards for communities and individuals
- ❖ Achieve a healthy forest that supports biodiversity
- ❖ Achieve economic stability

The Forest Service had a computer-based watershed model developed. This model provides up-to-date science for designing projects to improve watershed management. The fire hazard reduction goal is to reduce fuel loads on 80 percent of all lands within the watershed. Our goal is to contact 100 percent of adjacent landowners to make information and assistance available to them. For areas that are not within a wildland-urban interface, forest health goals include reducing infestations of insects and disease and improving overall forest conditions that maintain biodiversity. Over 50,000 acres are targeted for such

treatment. Management priorities for 2001 were fuels reduction in the wildland-urban interface and completing additional environmental analyses for future projects.

III. Accomplishments

A. Actions – Actions completed in 2001 include:

RIO PEÑASCO UPDATE SUMMARY RESOURCE ACCOMPLISHMENTS			
	<u>1999-2000</u>	<u>2001</u>	<u>2002+</u>
Thinning			
Pre-commercial WUI	1,600 acres	1532 acres	30,000-35,000 acres
Commercial	500 acres		
Firewood		1000 cords	2,500 acres
Prescribed burning			
Piles WUI	150 acres	500 acres	
Broadcast		1,500 acres	
Riparian Improvements			4 springs
Meadow Restoration			1,200 acres
Access Management			
Culverts	2		
Ditches	2		
Construct			
Reconstruct			
Maintenance			
Closure			12 miles
Obliterate			10 miles
Trail relocate/design			
Wildlife Habitat Improvement			2,500 acres
Grants			
Cloud Country Pond Pump	\$7,000		
Private Acres Thinned			
Otero County			
Mescalero Mill Retooling			\$225,000 Fed \$277,000 Matching
Inventories			50,000 acres
Recreation			
		Cloudcroft Depot Area Village Thinning Project	
		Silver Saddle CG upgrade 1 mile Powerline Relocation NEPA to upgrade Fir CG	Hang glider site Boxcar Bridge James Canyon Campground Rehab
Heritage			Mexican Trestle restoration

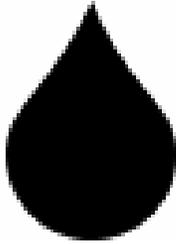
Outcome Summary

Water Quality/Quantity

Acres Treated



Target Acres



Fuels Reduction

Acres Treated



Target Acres

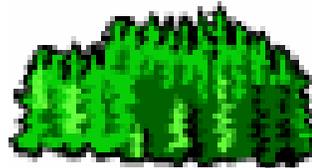


Forest Health

Acres Treated



Target Acres



B. Environmental Consequences/Outcomes

Biological/Physical – Fire hazard reduction has been achieved on about six percent of the targeted acres within the project area. Activities have been focused on the highest priority acres for fuels reduction. Completed watershed improvement projects include modernizing campground toilets, realigning over 10 miles of road, building six drainage structures to increase habitat for the endangered Sacramento thistle, and monitoring of Cloudcroft checkerspot butterfly habitat (1200 acres). These forest health treatments have potential to create new butterfly habitat and to protect habitat from catastrophic fire.

Socio-economic – The Mescalero Apache Tribe purchased the White Sands Forest Products sawmill. This mill uses area lumber to produce construction-grade

2x4s. Through a grant awarded to Otero County, the existing sawmill will be retrofitted to update obsolete equipment and add the capability to produce 2x6, 4x4, and 6x6 inch lumber and process smaller-diameter material (down to 4 inch diameter material). These improvements are projected to result in 45 additional jobs.

Area citizens and homeowners' associations are taking a lead role in reducing fire hazard on private property. Forest Employees have attended public forums to keep informed of issues and provide input as appropriate. The Forest has also provided data and support to a County-funded research project. District and Forest personal have made presentations to local home association groups to help raise awareness of collaboration efforts and financial assistance.

C. Growth – During 2001, the Rio Peñasco Partnership has solidified into a group that has common goals and is working together to achieve those goals. Political leaders at the national, state, and local levels have joined in supporting this collaborative effort. Private property owners associations have rallied their groups to a common objective of creating and maintaining a safer wildland-urban interface. Two leaders during 2001 were Robin Hood Estates and Cloud Country Estates—both utilizing formal partnerships with State and Federal agencies.

D. Products Produced – The Forest Service contracted the development of a prototype computer-based watershed model for the Rio Peñasco Watershed. This model is PC-based and simulates ecological responses of soil and plant components to a wide variety of natural changes (such as wildfire) or human activities (such as cutting trees). After testing the model on this watershed, the Forest hopes to use it to assist in managing other watersheds on the Lincoln National Forest.

E. Featured Partner – Cloud Country Estates - Through several Federal grants, Cloud Country Estates Property Owners Association has taken a leadership role by developing a management plan for, and implementation of, fuels reduction on private lands within the Forest boundary. This plan is being formalized through a partnership with New Mexico State Forestry, Natural Resources Conservation Service,



and Southcentral Mountain Resource Conservation and Development Council. The Natural Resource Conservation Service is guiding development of the plan. Administration, implementation, and educational activities will be provided through South Central Mountain Resource Conservation and Development Council, Lincoln National Forest, and New Mexico State Forestry. Accomplishments include installation of a water pump to fill fire engines from the Estates' pond, development and use of a community slash pit, and numerous thinning projects. The plan will establish prescriptions for various levels of thinning needs. The Estates have trained 15 owners who form two-person teams to operate the water pump in emergency situations. The pump delivers 600 gallons per minute from the 125 acre-feet available in the pond. Partners who have contributed money include Otero County Electric Cooperative, James Canyon Fire Department, Otero County, Forest Service, and the Estates.

IV. Challenges and Change

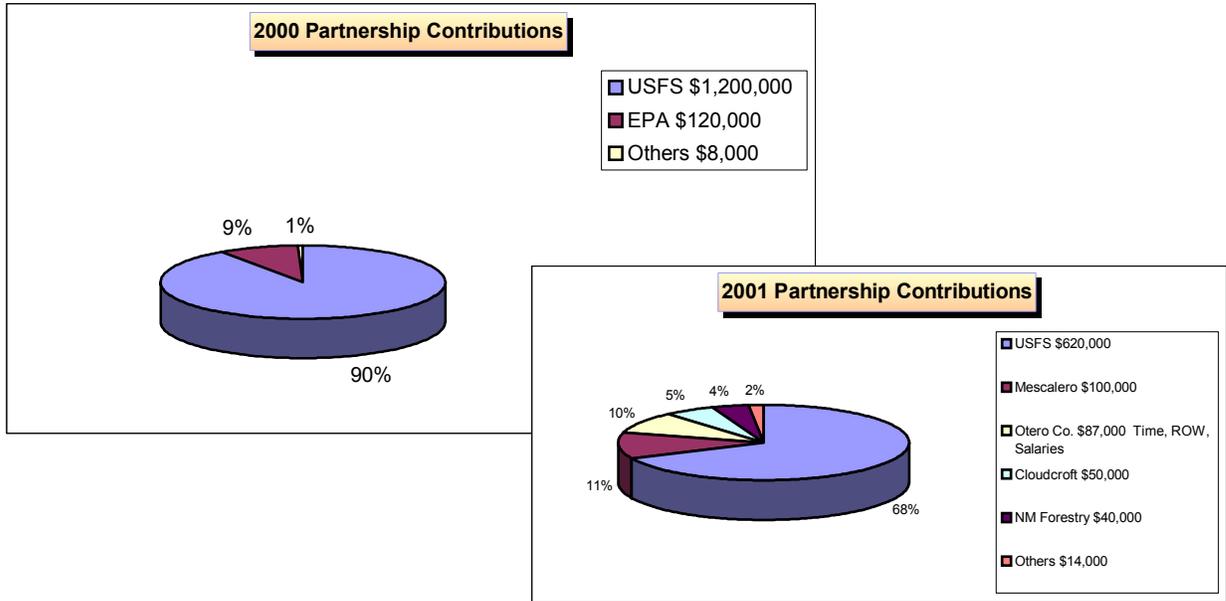
The Cloudcroft checkerspot butterfly has been proposed for listing as an endangered species. This rare butterfly inhabits higher elevation mountain meadows. Activities such as recreation, grazing (both by cattle and elk), and timber harvest may be threats to its habitat and life cycle. If the species is listed, such activities may be restricted in known and potential habitat areas. Water yield issues have also taken a priority for individuals and communities dependent on the Sacramento Mountains for their water source. Community interests are seeking to balance downstream community water use with the needs of mountain users. Recent proposed solutions to on-going elk/livestock foraging competition have brought this issue into the spotlight again. State and federal agencies are exploring ways to balance livestock numbers and elk populations within the context of a continuing drought trend. We have had to overcome difficulties in communicating with the public caused in part by litigation affecting T&E species and a major wildfire in 2000 that burned structures. As a result, all community members have been challenged to rebuild trust, learn more about issues, and concentrate on communication and sharing information in a timely manner.

V. Future Actions and Opportunities

With the initiation and implementation of the National Fire Plan, focus has turned towards wildland-urban interface work. Phase 3 and other future actions will focus on issues such as watershed health outside the wildland-urban interface, travel management, cooperative water management, and trail and dispersed recreation management. The Rio Peñasco Partnership will review the partnership plan, and a project implementation plan will be developed. Additional partners will include more homeowners associations and individuals who can take advantage of grants and other funding opportunities.

VI. Partnership Budget/Costs

Partnership contributions are displayed below.



Wildland Urban Interface—Lincoln National Forest Embedded Contract to salvage merchantable



Before



After

Wildland Urban Interface—Village of Cloudcroft



Before



After

VII. Partnership Contacts

Leaders of the Rio Peñasco Partnership include:

Gary Wood , Chairperson – Village of Cloudcroft gary@mountainmonthly.com	(505) 682-6029
Mike Nivison – Otero County Commissioner	(505) 682-2411 sleepy@trailnet.com
Barbara Luna – New Mexico State Forestry Dept.	(505) 354-2231 bluna@state.nm.us
Jose Martinez – Lincoln National Forest Supervisor	(505) 434-7200 jmmartinez@fs.fed.us
Jeff Steinborn - Senator Bingaman jeff_steinborn@bingaman.senate.gov	(505) 523-6561

Other partners include:

Mescalero Forest Products – Jim Bridge
Robin Hood Estates – Bill Wright
Cloud Country Estates – Steve Stone