

NEW MEXICO LAND CONSERVANCY

Preserving New Mexico's Land Heritage

PRESS RELEASE

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NEW LEGISLATION CREATES FUNDING FOR LAND CONSERVATION AND RESTORATION IN NEW MEXICO

Santa Fe, New Mexico - On Monday, Governor Bill Richardson signed the Natural Heritage Conservation Act, a bill passed during the recent legislative session to protect land, water, wildlife, and working farms and ranches across New Mexico. This new legislation, sponsored by state Senator Carlos Cisneros (D-Taos), will establish a program that will enable the state to make grants to fund conservation easement and restoration projects on private lands.

“For the first time, New Mexico will have a permanent mechanism for funding conservation projects across our state,” said Governor Richardson at the signing ceremony for the Natural Heritage Conservation Act. “I am also pleased that we were able to secure \$5 million during the legislative session, so that we will be able to start funding these important initiatives right away.”

Despite the state's current financial problems, New Mexico House Speaker Ben Lujan (D-Santa Fe) said it was important to earmark land for conservation. At the signing ceremony, Lujan posed the question, “If we don't do it now, when? When the land is gone?”

With conservation easements, willing private landowners voluntarily enter into agreements with qualified conservation organizations or public agencies to restrict subdivision, development and certain incompatible uses of the land in order to protect the wildlife, agricultural, scenic open space,

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cultural and/or recreational values of the subject lands. Landowners who grant easements retain ownership of their land and can continue to farm, ranch and engage in other traditional forms of land use that are consistent with the purposes of the easement. They can also lease, sell or pass their land on to their heirs, but the easements run with the land and are binding on all future landowners.

“Every year, New Mexico is losing thousands of acres of productive farm and ranch land along with the associated conservation values they provide to unbridled growth and development,” said Larry Winn, Chair of the New Mexico Soil & Water Commission. “We view conservation easements as a way to keep agricultural land in family ownership and in production, and as an important option for farmers and ranchers to consider as an alternative to simply selling, subdividing and developing their lands.”

“Easements are as much a tax and financial planning mechanism as they are a conservation tool for private landowners,” said Scott Wilber, Executive Director of the New Mexico Land Conservancy, a statewide non-profit land trust based in Santa Fe. He noted that landowners can receive significant federal and state tax incentives by donating part or all or the value of a conservation easement, but added that in a state like New Mexico where many of the landowners are land-rich and cash-poor, particularly within the agricultural community, tax benefits alone are not always enough to get the job done.

“Conservation easements and restoration cost money,” said Wilber. “A combination of state funding and tax incentives will further enhance the ability of conservation organizations, public agencies, municipalities, land grants, tribes, and soil and water conservation districts to work with private landowners to conserve their lands.”

The program created by the Natural Heritage Conservation Act will also help leverage other sources of conservation funding, through federal programs such as the Land & Water Conservation Fund, the Farm Bill, the Clean Water Act, the USDA Farm & Ranchland Protection and Forest Legacy programs, as well as state wildlife grants and local conservation funding from New Mexico’s cities and counties. Studies have shown that New Mexico misses out on approximately \$20 million in federal land and water conservation funding each year because it does not have adequate state matching funds. By creating this program, New Mexico is capitalizing on a major opportunity to draw more resources to the state to help preserve what makes it the “Land of Enchantment” – its natural, agricultural and cultural heritage.

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