

# NEW MEXICO LAND CONSERVANCY

Preserving New Mexico's Land Heritage

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

Contact: Scott Wilber, Executive Director  
New Mexico Land Conservancy  
505-986-3801  
505-986-3806  
[scottwilber@nmlandconservancy.org](mailto:scottwilber@nmlandconservancy.org)  
[www.nmlandconservancy.org](http://www.nmlandconservancy.org)

## **Mimbres River Ranch Protected near City of Rocks State Park**

Santa Fe, New Mexico, April 15, 2011

Today, the New Mexico Land Conservancy announced the permanent protection of over 1,000 acres of land on the River Ranch, located at the southern end of the Mimbres River valley in southwestern New Mexico, in partnership with the New Mexico State Forestry Division. Partial funding was provided for the easement through the New Mexico Energy, Minerals and Natural Resources Department, and the easement will be co-held by the two organizations.

The landowners, Gene and Elisabeth Simon, first approached the New Mexico Land Conservancy in late 2009 after learning about the organization through another rancher who had recently protected his land. "We decided that a conservation easement would allow us to ensure permanent protection for the land while enabling a future owner to continue ranching, and, as a state wide land trust, the New Mexico Land Conservancy seemed like the best choice to help us accomplish that." When the Conservancy mentioned the funding opportunity with State Forestry, the Simons liked the idea of the public-private partnership and that State Forestry would be preparing a forest stewardship plan and the Conservancy would be monitoring and enforcing the conservation easement.

Straddling Grant and Luna counties, the River Ranch encompasses a three mile stretch of its namesake – the Mimbres River – which is the lowest reach of the river that flows perennially before disappearing into the desert. The river supports a mature mixed Cottonwood-Ash riparian gallery forest, including the current state champion Velvet Ash tree, and a seasonally flooded area of rare, native Sacaton grasslands, which stand out in sharp contrast to the surrounding Chihuahuan desert scrubland. This unique combination of vegetative communities translates into particularly high biological diversity. Black bear, mountain lion, mule deer, javelina, coyotes, bobcats, turkey and a variety of bird species are all known to occur on the ranch.

"Much of the high quality private lands along water and nearby public lands are highly susceptible to development," noted Scott Wilber, the Conservancy's Executive Director. "The Simons have done a wonderful thing by protecting their ranch in perpetuity and ensuring that the river corridor is

PO Box 6759 • SANTA FE, NEW MEXICO 87502  
TEL: 505-986-3801 • FAX: 505-986-3806  
WWW.NMLANDCONSERVANCY.ORG

protected for wildlife and that the easement land will serve as a permanent buffer to prevent the encroachment of development on the nearby City of Rocks State Park.”

It took a little over a year to complete the easement process, but Gene Simon is pleased with the results. “When you get to be this old, it’s kind of like looking down the barrel of a gun,” quipped Simon, who celebrated his 95<sup>th</sup> birthday last month. “You don’t have a lot of time to spare, but when you are talking about doing something that’s going to last forever, you need to make sure to do it right.”

And Gene Simon is certainly someone who knows how to get things done right. He has demonstrated that time and time again over a colorful lifetime that has included many notable achievements. To name a few, he survived a Japanese kamikaze attack to the aircraft carrier on which he was serving in the South Pacific during World War II; he published a family newspaper in western Pennsylvania for 27 years that took on the mob and was awarded a Pulitzer Prize for the iconic photo of a young woman kneeling over the body of a dead student during the Kent State shooting of Vietnam War protesters; and finally, at the age of 60, he decided to sell his share of stock in his newspaper in order to buy a ranch in New Mexico and fulfill his childhood dream of becoming a cowboy. “Some of my friends and peers thought I was crazy for doing that,” noted Simon, “but it was the best decision I ever made!”

After operating a much larger ranch that included a 67,000-acre U.S. Forest Service grazing allotment in the Gila Wilderness Area for six years, in 1979 Simon decided that he needed to scale things down. So, he and his wife, Libby, decided to purchase a small spread - the 81-acre Rancho del Rio – along the Mimbres River near the town of Faywood, which lies about 20 miles southeast of Silver City as the crow flies. But Simon wasn’t quite ready to retire from the livestock business and soon expanded the River Ranch by purchasing another 7,600 acres from neighboring ranchers.

Always strong supporters of conservation, between 2005 and 2006, the Simons agreed to sell approximately 1,000 acres of the River Ranch to the New Mexico State Parks Division to expand the nearby City of Rocks State Park. The Simons also entered into a cooperative agreement with State Parks, through their foundation, to provide substantial funding for the expansion of the park’s programs and services. A few years later, the Simons donated ten acres to the Archaeological Conservancy to afford permanent protection of the historic Pruitt Ranch site located within their ranch.

The decision to protect the remaining portions of their ranch with a conservation easement is the culmination of Gene Simon’s excellent stewardship of the River Ranch for over three and a half decades. “After living in this beautiful valley for so long and coming to know all the natural and cultural treasures on this ranch, I couldn’t stand the thought of breaking up the integrity of this incredible place and someone putting up a bunch of houses and mobile homes on the ranch after Libby and I are gone.”

Founded in 2002, the New Mexico Land Conservancy is dedicated to preserving New Mexico’s land heritage by working with private landowners, communities, conservation organizations, and public agencies to protect significant wildlife habitat, productive agricultural lands, scenic open

space, cultural and historic resources, and recreational lands for conservation purposes and human benefit.

The Conservancy's goal is to conserve, directly or in partnership with others, 250,000 acres of high conservation value lands throughout the state by 2016 through the use of conservation easements and other voluntary land protection methods. To date, the New Mexico Land Conservancy has helped private landowners conserve over 85,000 acres of land throughout the state, and continues to pursue new conservation opportunities in southwest New Mexico to help landowners conserve more land in this unique and special part of the state.

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