

NEW MEXICO LAND CONSERVANCY

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

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Mimbres River Ranch to become new State Wildlife Management Area

Santa Fe, New Mexico, August 5, 2014

Today, the New Mexico Land Conservancy announced that, through a unique public-private partnership between the NMLC and the New Mexico Department of Game & Fish, a 1,010 acre ranch property located on the lower Mimbres River in southwestern New Mexico will become one of New Mexico's newest State wildlife management areas. The property, known as the River Ranch, will be owned and managed by the New Mexico Department of Game & Fish for wildlife, compatible public recreation, and educational purposes. Funding for the acquisition of the River Ranch was made possible with a combination of public funds from the New Mexico Department of Game & Fish's Share with Wildlife Program, the New Mexico Office of Natural Resources Trustee (ONRT) and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS), combined with private support funding from the Turner Foundation, Element Power and Wells Fargo Bank.

"The acquisition of the River Ranch by the New Mexico Department of Game & Fish is a wonderful gift for New Mexico," said Scott Wilber, the New Mexico Land Conservancy's Executive Director. "As a new state wildlife management area, the river corridor and the surrounding habitat will be protected for the benefit of wildlife and the property will serve as a permanent buffer to prevent the encroachment of development on the nearby City of Rocks State Park."

The River Ranch is located approximately 20 miles northeast of Deming and encompasses about a two mile stretch of its namesake – the Mimbres River – at a point where the river still flows perennially before disappearing underground into the Chihuahuan 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.

Conservation of this important property started with an initial working relationship established in 2009 between the landowners, Gene and Elisabeth Simon, and the New Mexico Land Conservancy. The New Mexico Land Conservancy and the Simons agreed that much of the high quality private lands located along water or close to public lands in New Mexico are highly susceptible to development. In consultation with the New Mexico Land Conservancy, the Simons agreed that the best way to protect their land from subdivision and development was to place the entire ranch under a conservation easement. The New Mexico Land Conservancy worked with funding and support from the New Mexico State Forestry Division to complete the conservation easement in 2011.

Ultimately, it was the Simons' vision to find a public agency that would be willing to acquire the ranch and manage it for conservation and educational purposes. With the sudden passing of Gene Simon in the spring of 2012, the ranch and the property became part of his estate under the management of Wells Fargo Bank. Working with Wells Fargo Bank, the New Mexico Land Conservancy was able to negotiate for time to find a conservation buyer for the ranch while Elisabeth Simon was still alive.

Fortunately, that same spring, the New Mexico Land Conservancy became aware of potential funding for the project resulting from an environmental settlement between the State of New Mexico and Freeport-McMoRan Inc., an international mining company. Following a natural resources damage assessment of their mining operations in southwest New Mexico, this settlement included the creation of a \$5.5 million wildlife habitat restoration fund to be used for land protection and restoration projects designed to offset the impacts of the Chino, Cobre and Tyrone copper mining facilities in southwest New Mexico. The New Mexico Land Conservancy worked closely with the New Mexico Department of Game & Fish for over a year and a half to prepare a successful application for the River Ranch acquisition.

Finally, in mid-July of 2014, with the unanimous approval of the State Game Commission and excellent cooperation between all of the partners, the sale of the River Ranch to the New Mexico Department of Game & Fish was completed. The sale includes a life estate for Elisabeth Simon that will allow her to live out the remainder of her life on the ranch.

While it took nearly five years to complete the entire process, Elisabeth Simon and her family are pleased with the final results. "After living in this valley for so long, Gene and I simply couldn't stand the thought of breaking up the integrity of this beautiful place and allowing the land to be developed after we were gone," said Elisabeth Simon, now 95. "I wish that Gene had lived to see this day, but I'm sure that he would be pleased to know that the wildlife and future generations of New Mexicans are going to be able to continue enjoying the ranch as much as we have."

"The River Ranch project represents a big part of the conservation legacy of the landowners, Gene and Elisabeth Simon, and honors the wishes of the Simons and their family to see the property permanently protected," noted Wilber. "It is really the culmination of Gene Simon's excellent stewardship of the ranch for nearly three and a half decades. We are very pleased with the broad

level of support this project has received and grateful to have had the opportunity to help conserve this special place.”

Founded in 2002, the New Mexico Land Conservancy is a statewide, non-profit land trust dedicated to helping people conserve the lands they love. The trust works 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 at community, watershed and landscape scales. The New Mexico Land Conservancy’s goal is to protect, directly or in partnership with others, one million acres of high conservation value lands throughout the state by 2037. To date, the organization has helped private and public landowners conserve nearly 130,000 acres of land throughout the state.

For more information on the life of Gene Simon and his contributions to New Mexico visit:

www.nmlandconservancy.org

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Photos available upon request.