

## Working to Conserve New Mexico's Northeast Grasslands

— A Special Report | September 2018





A look at 7 years of dedication to the protection of working lands, wildlife habitat and watersheds.



Photo by Connor Jandreau

A critical reality of any conservation effort is the need for *prioritization* – how to stretch limited time and resources so that our efforts are maximized for the greatest benefits, whether for migrating wildlife, watershed health, ecosystem function or agricultural viability.

In New Mexico, one ecosystem encapsulates such a balance, where the impacts are profound and the potential for landscape-scale conservation remains tangible. The northeastern grasslands, spanning north from Las Vegas to Raton and east to the Texas border, exemplify the expansive, intact shortgrass prairie which once dominated the North American horizon from Manitoba to Chihuahua.

Over several centuries of conversion and management shortcomings, what was once host to the largest assemblage of mega-faunal biomass on Earth has now been whittled down to pockets of native prairie where the impracticability of farming leaves livestock production and wildlife management as two competing but not necessary mutually exclusive forms of large-scale land use.

As both The Nature Conservancy and the Audubon Society independently measured, the shortgrass prairies of northeastern New Mexico embody one of, if not the most important relic native prairies in North America – critical habitat for a multitude of grassland-dependent birds and other wildlife whose populations have precipitously declined over the past several decades. And as wind energy, the creep of Rocky Mountain Front Range development, and climate change together pose significant threats to the viability of this remaining critical habitat, private land conservation remains an effective tool bridging important conservation goals with rural economic priorities.

The progress made thus far through the partnerships between the New Mexico Land Conservancy (NMLC), landowners and other public and private partners has been substantial, but as one looks across the playas and grama grasslands of Colfax and Mora Counties, it is work yet to unfold that will determine if enough of this New Mexico landscape will be protected and conserved in a meaningful way to ensure the viability of both wildlife and ranching in this important region. #



Eastern Meadowlark | Photo by Mark Watson



# Land Conservation in Northeastern New Mexico

## — a convergence of shared interests

### BACKGROUND

Founded in 2002, the New Mexico Land Conservancy (NMLC) is an accredited, statewide, non-profit land trust. Our mission is to preserve New Mexico's land heritage by helping people conserve the places they love. Our three strategic goals for New Mexico and the Southwest are: 1) Conservation – to increase land conservation and ensure excellent stewardship of these lands; 2) Education – to increase awareness of and appreciation for land conservation; and 3) Capacity Building – to develop greater capacity for land conservation.

To achieve our mission and goals, we work with a variety of public and private partners to protect and conserve significant wildlife habitat, productive agricultural lands, scenic open space, cultural and historic resources, and recreational lands for conservation purposes and public benefit at community, watershed and landscape scales. NMLC's long-term goal is to protect, directly or in partnership with others, one million acres of high conservation value lands throughout the state and Southwest region. To date, we have completed over 80 conservation projects, permanently protecting nearly 200,000 acres of land in New Mexico and southeast Arizona.

### WHY NORTHEAST NEW MEXICO?

As part of our ongoing strategic planning, NMLC has identified the montane and grassland ecosystems of northeastern New Mexico, including the major watersheds along the front range of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, as a priority conservation area based on conservation values, needs, threats and opportunities. This region contains a rich diversity of natural habitat, critical wildlife migration corridors and important cultural sites, including three National Wildlife Refuges (Las Vegas, Maxwell and Rio Mora), the Kiowa National Grasslands, the Ft. Union National Monument and the National His-

toric Santa Fe Trail. All of these attributes, combined with the relatively unfragmented surrounding private land base, provide compelling reasons to focus on conservation in northeast New Mexico.

Conservation efforts, in general, throughout the state tended to neglect the northeast grasslands, perhaps from lack of appreciation for the significance of this vast, at first glance "mono-terrain." But this ecosystem is much richer than just the important open space visible from the highway – it is one that supports livestock production and a wide array of wildlife and waterfowl habitat – and constitutes a critical watershed for much of the state's populated areas downstream.

Keeping this landscape unfragmented, protecting the river corridors, buffering wildlife refuges, and creating a mosaic of protected public and private lands are essential to ensuring adequate habitat and corridors to sustain viable wildlife populations. Riparian habitat and seasonal playalakes, in particular, are crucial to providing wetland habitat for resident and migrating birds. Within this diverse landscape, ranging from the alpine and montane ecosystems of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains to pinyon-juniper woodlands and savannas, to short-grass prairie, is represented some of the greatest habitat diversity in the state. Northeast New Mexico is also home to numerous threatened and endangered species and species of greatest conservation concern such as the Canada lynx, pine marten, black-footed ferret, mountain plover, ferruginous hawk, burrowing owls, black-tailed prairie dog, swift fox, collared lizard, and many species of grassland birds.

The primary threats to the integrity of this landscape are the subdivision of large ranches into smaller ranches or ranchettes and recreational retreats for people from regional urban centers; along with increasing development of wind and solar energy and the associated transmission lines. Northeast

New Mexico is sparsely populated with families whose livelihoods have historically been closely tied to the land. With an aging and declining agricultural population, land along the Front Range and in the valleys along the river corridors are under threat of subdivision for ranchettes and hunting retreats. As the economy continues to grow, we anticipate more of this kind of development, leading to more land fragmentation which will result in greater disruption of natural habitat, wildlife corridors and the traditional ranching lifestyle.

In short, keeping this last-remaining unfragmented prairie intact represents a critical contribution to New Mexico's overall land heritage and ecological health and is worth protecting from the pressure of development (particularly energy development) so tempting with this vast, unobstructed, relatively flat and easily developed land.

### OUR STRATEGIC APPROACH

NMLC has focused much of its efforts in northeast New Mexico on helping ranchers maintain the integrity of their working lands. In much of this vast and diverse region, it is the large private ranches that provide critical, unfragmented wildlife habitat and corridors, and open views; contain important cultural and historic resources; and support the traditional rural economy that defines this part of the state.

NMLC's work in the northeast revolves around the concept that there is an ever-increasing convergence of shared interests – uniting large, privately owned ranchlands with neighboring public lands such as the Rio Mora National Wildlife Refuge, for example – thereby holistically creating greater conservation value as a result of this proximity, and drawing in other government agency and nonprofit partners who share a vested interest in the health and preservation of this region's land and resources as well.

Our strategic approach to conserving this significant grassland prairie has been "catalytic" – getting one rancher on board, which then sparks the interests of another landowner, which then begins to attract other public and private interest and support for land conservation and restoration. In the beginning of this targeted approach, the cultural attitude in the northeast was not particularly "welcoming" to the idea of conservation easements so it took some strategic persistence by NMLC to overcome these misperceptions.

Another important aspect of this targeted effort in the northeast is that our work doesn't stop with conservation easements. Better land management methods and restoration work on the ground are a necessary next-step if the easements are to create measurable results in the long run. The landowners we're working with in the northeast are pioneering research and new techniques to restore and enhance the condition of the land being conserved.

Over the last several years, NMLC has produced solid results and encouraging success with our ranchland and wildlife habitat conservation work in the northeast. We have cultivated relationships with several key private landowners and successfully partnered with the U.S. Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and, more recently, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (FWS). With the goal of protecting another 200,000 acres of productive working lands and critical habitat over the next 10 years in northeast New Mexico alone, our initial conservation projects now have the makings for a much larger and more comprehensive landscape and watershed scale conservation initiative.

We ultimately hope to harness the growing momentum of local, state and federal agencies, watershed associations, ranchers, and land stewards to preserve the ecological integrity, wildlife corridors, functioning watersheds, productive working lands, open vistas and cultural heritage of northeastern New Mexico. #

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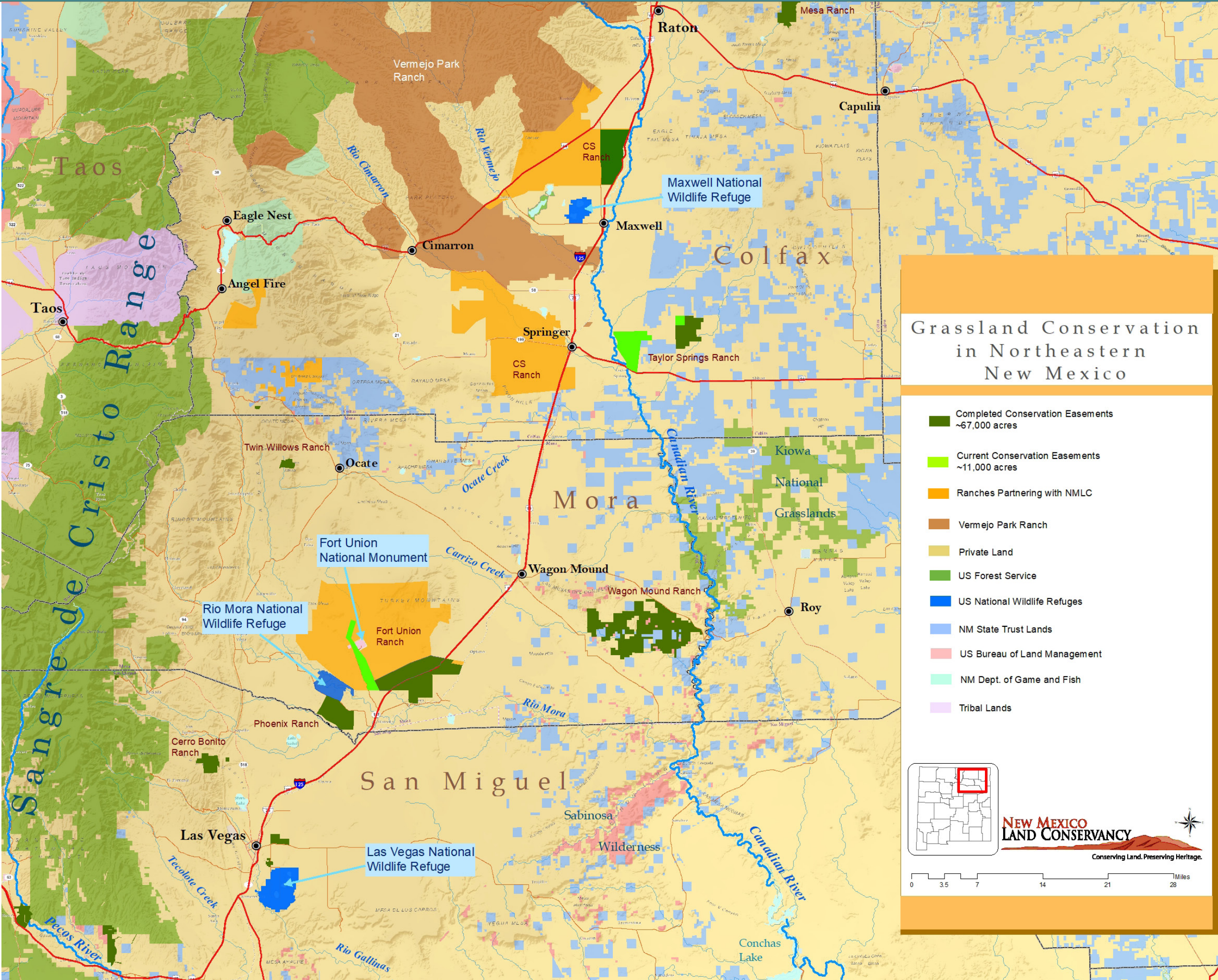


# Preserving the Prairie – One Ranch at a Time

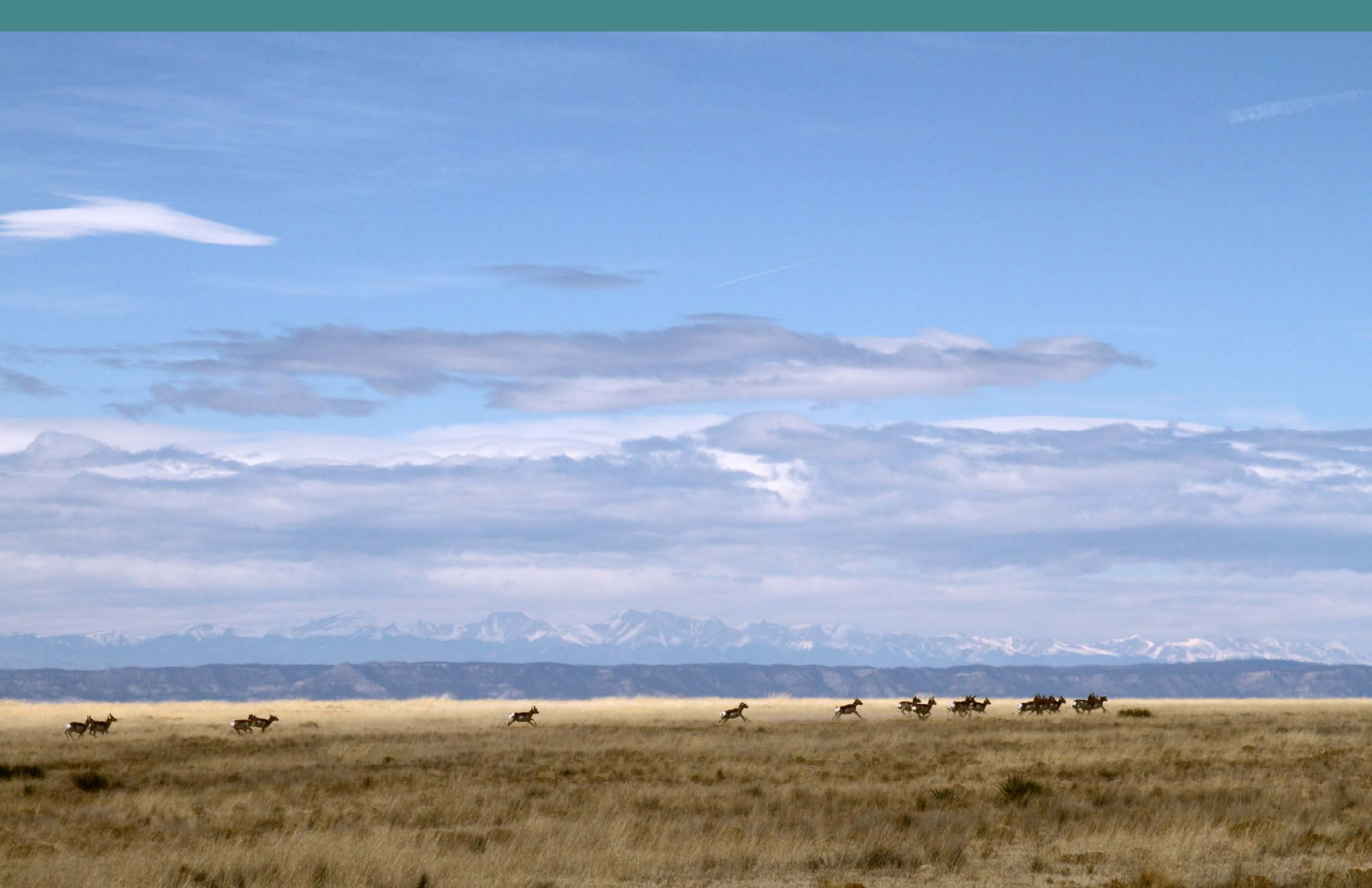
NMLC and its partners have embarked on a long-term strategic conservation initiative in the Northeast Grasslands of New Mexico, one ranch at a time.

As the ranching community begins to warm to the win-win of conservation easements, we have witnessed our efforts ramping up as more partners realize the values of preserving the integrity of this expansive, intact grassland and the rural ranching way-of-life that is often associated with it.

(Ranch profiles, next few pages)









## MOORE LAND & CATTLE COMPANY | Greg Moore

Our endeavors began in 2012 on the **Wagon Mound Ranch**, a 23,000-acre working ranch owned by Greg Moore of Moore Land & Cattle Company who, over a three-year period, placed his entire ranch under easement with a combination of U.S. Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) funding and easement donations. Greg considers himself a resource manager rather than a rancher, tailoring his agricultural operation on the productivity – and recovery – of his grassland habitats and wildlife reserves. He employs a form of grass-banking – what he terms “wildlife sanctuaries” – setting aside pastures for multiple growing seasons to recruit new bunch grasses, increase fuel-loads in preparation for fire management, and provide a mixed grazing intensity regime for wildlife.

Greg is currently working with the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish to reintroduce black-footed ferrets onto the expansive prairie dog towns found on the Wagon Mound Ranch, the first release scheduled for this summer. He has re-introduced beaver with success; and snapping turtles, muskrat and other aquatic wildlife are harbored by new and expanding beaver ponds. Greg is now partnering with the Playa Lakes Joint Venture to restore playas on the ranch. Thanks in large part to the success of his conservation efforts at Wagon Mound Ranch, Greg is now working with NMLC and NRCS to place his 10, 000 acre Taylor Springs Ranch – which has recently been recognized by NRCS as a “Grassland of Special Environmental Significance” – under easement in two phases between 2019–2020. #





## FORT UNION RANCH | The Union Land & Grazing Company

Just north of the quiet community of Watrous lies another integral partner in this strategic endeavor to protect the northeast grasslands and the significant Rio Mora watershed. The Fort Union Ranch stretches for miles across the horizon from the Mora River to the Ponderosa pine and Douglas fir forests of the Turkey Mountains. The mix of grasslands, wetlands and higher elevational forest provides habitat for a variety of wildlife including pronghorn antelope, elk, deer, black bear, mountain lion and wild turkey.

NMLC began assisting the owners of the ranch – the Union Land & Grazing Company – in 2014, using conservation easements as a tool to protect what remains of this iconic ranch which has remained in the ownership of the descendants of the original owner, General Benjamin Butler, since shortly after the Civil War. The ranch completely surrounds and provides the uninterrupted viewshed for the Ft. Union National Monument, which was a convergence point for the various traces of the historic Santa Fe Trail which criss-cross this 98,000-acre ranch.

Proceeds from the sale of state tax credits has helped create a regular stream of revenue to equip managers

with resources to implement the recommendations for improved land and resource stewardship originating from a plan prepared by the Sonora Institute. In 2017, the Fort Union Ranch hired a new holistic land manager in an effort to improve the sustainability of their cattle operation, and also turned to hunting, low-impact tourism and conservation as alternative land-uses to diversify operations across the ranch.

To date, Fort Union Ranch has placed more than 10,000 acres under easement in four separate easement phases with another 6,500 acres underway over the next two years. NMLC was recently awarded a \$100,000 grant from U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service through the North American Wetlands Conservation Act (NAWCA) which will see the protection of critical waterfowl loafing and migration habitats on Dry and Wheeler Lakes, as well as the remaining reach of Wolf Creek placed under easement with in-stream restoration coordinated by the Hermit's Peak Watershed Alliance to bring the riparian corridor back to full-function. Fort Union Ranch is building a strong legacy as it evolves into a leadership role among land stewards in New Mexico and the West. #



Photo courtesy of High Plains Grasslands Alliance

## CS RANCH | The Davis Family

Another legacy ranch located further north in Colfax County, the CS Ranch recently committed to placing 8,500 acres of its larger 116,000 acre holdings – an area known as Crow Creek immediately north of the Maxwell Wildlife Refuge – under conservation easement in 2018 with NRCS funding.

The CS Ranch, founded in 1873, has had and continues to have an immeasurable impact on the ranching community in northeast New Mexico – and with a nod from the Davis Family, our strategic conservation strategy in the northeast appears to have a bright future with the ranching community.

In addition to conservation easements, CS Ranch is working to remodel their approach on the land, looking at local farm-to-table and direct-sales to building educational opportunities for area schools among other initiatives. CS Ranch is also looking into the Audubon Society's Conservation Ranching program as a possible avenue for marketing bird-friendly beef given their holistic approach to land stewardship. There are possibilities yet to be discovered as we build a stronger partnership with CS Ranch and the Davis Family. #

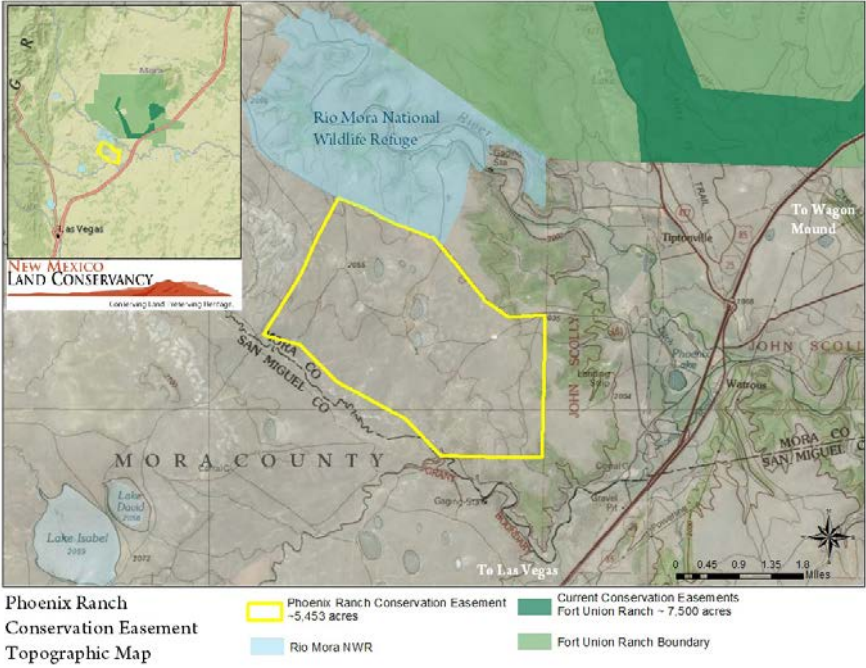




# PHOENIX RANCH

The richness of the shortgrass prairie arises not solely from the diverse flora, but also from the thousands of seasonal wetlands and playas that dot the landscape, playing host to thousands of migrating waterfowl and water birds who depend entirely on these waterbodies as they navigate an otherwise arid expanse.

Nowhere better is this on display than on the 5,400-acre Phoenix Ranch, where more than a dozen playas dot the landscape and help buffer to the Rio Mora National Wildlife Refuge. On NMLC's regular monitoring visits to the ranch, it is not uncommon to flush a pair of breeding American avocets or watch a long-billed curlew probe for insects while his mate incubates their young. Piping plovers, killdeer, greater yellowlegs, and if one is lucky, a Mountain Plover, can be seen on the ranch all or part of the year, not to mention the large numbers of wintering waterfowl during wet years. #



Above: Phoenix Ranch outlined in yellow shows its proximity to the Rio Mora National Wildlife Refuge.



# MESA RANCH

The disruption of the prairie by the palisades of Johnson Mesa is an abrupt reminder that you are in “high-lo” country, a term attributed to the renowned western writer, Max Evans, who “cowboyed” in this part of New Mexico in his youth. At the heart of this tableland sits the Mesa Ranch, 3,560-acres of which were conserved through a combination of NRCS and NCF funding and easement donation, protecting the headwaters of Uña de Gato creek which drains the basalt bluffs of Johnson Mesa through Taylor Canyon.

This property marks the northern most extent of our strategic planning area, where one has only to look north from the mesa top on a clear day to see the expanding reach of growth and development along the I-25 corridor extending south of Pueblo, Colorado. With a mature Gambel oak canopy and a preponderance of healthy springs, Mesa Ranch offers a unique oak-forest mosaic attractive to elk, deer, black bear and a host of neotropical migrant birds. It also hosts a uniquely diverse faunal community as a transitional zone, with species representative of the southern Great Plains as well as the Southern Rocky Mountains. The property is managed primarily to retain its integrity as a haven for wildlife. #



Left: Monsoon season over Phoenix Ranch seasonal playas | photo by Sandra Halpin





# NEW MEXICO LAND CONSERVANCY

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## Our Mission:

To preserve New Mexico's land heritage  
by helping people conserve the places  
they love.