

Big names in wildlife attend Taos summit

Written by By Ben Neary New Mexico Wildlife Federation
Friday, 30 August 2019 01:20



U. S. Congresswoman expresses support for wildlife corridor protection

TAOS, N.M. - The headwaters of the Rio Grande and the surrounding landscape comprise one of the most intact and vital wildlife habitats in the nation. Protecting the wildlife migration corridors that thread through this special area of Northern New Mexico and Southern Colorado will require coordinated work from people from many different backgrounds and interests, panelists said at their summit Aug 20.

Scores of people including tribal officials, federal land managers, state wildlife biologists, conservationists and ranchers gathered in Taos for a day-long discussion of how to identify and protect wildlife corridors in the Upper Rio Grande watershed.

The National Wildlife Federation organized the Upper Rio Grande Wildlife Corridors Summit event on behalf of the Upper Rio Grande Wildlife Initiative. Other participating organizations included The New Mexico Wildlife Federation, The Wilderness Society, New Mexico Wild, Defenders of Wildlife, The Sierra Club, Rivers and Birds, Earth Keepers, Earth Care Congregation, Nuestra Tierra Conservation Project and Hispanics Enjoying Hunting, Camping and the Outdoors.

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Dr. Karl Malcolm, regional wildlife ecologist for the Southwestern Region of the U.S. Forest Service, said the Carson, Santa Fe and Cibola National Forests are currently accepting public comments on management plans that will guide forest management for years to come. The Rio Grande National Forest, in southern Colorado, is further along in developing a new management plan.

“Throughout the Southwest, but particularly in Northern New Mexico, the community has voiced a strong desire to see wildlife values highlighted in this forest plan,” Malcolm said.

The draft forest plans under development in New Mexico have strong language to protect wildlife corridors, Malcolm said. On the Santa Fe plan, for example, he said there are over 170 components of the plan that address habitat connectivity in some fashion.

Stewart Liley, biologist with the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish, said his department is working on improving wildlife habitat in north central New Mexico and elsewhere in the state. He said work is continuing to identify wildlife migration corridors.

“Really, we have a need to better understand how animals move across the landscape,” Liley said, adding that some big research projects are in the planning stages. In the northwest part of the state, he said his agency wants a better understanding of how wildlife migrate[s] between New Mexico and Colorado.

The New Mexico Legislature passed a bill this year putting up \$500,000 for the state game department to work with the New Mexico Department of Transportation to identify and address areas where crossing wildlife poses a threat to motorists.

Liley said the agencies are working together to develop management plans and the transportation infrastructure to recognize existing wildlife corridors and collaborate on reducing accidents and making sure there’s a permeable landscape, so animals can get across.

Rep. Georgene Louis (D-Acoma Pueblo) was a sponsor of the bill and was a panelist at the summit meeting. She said the intent was for the state agencies to work together to identify

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corridors, “so we could protect wildlife and protect people on the road.”

Jim Hirsch, with NMDOT, said his agency has been working on a wildlife crossing project near Cuba and plans to do another soon near Raton Pass. He said the state did a project in Tijeras Canyon, east of Albuquerque in 2008 that provides wildlife a passage between the Sandia and Manzano mountains.

Rep. Ben Ray Lujan (D-N.M.) said the need for action to address all wildlife corridors is urgent.

“When one in five animal and plant species in the United States are at risk of extinction, I certainly hope that we can get the attention of this administration,” he said.

“Largely because of habitat loss, degradation and fragmentation, the importance of robust, protective wildlife corridors cannot be understated. That’s why this conversation matters so much. We all understand the magnitude of what we have to do to protect mother earth, and that’s why I’m honored to be here today,” Lujan added.

Lujan is running to fill the U.S. Senate seat currently held by retiring Sen. Tom Udall (D-N.M.). Udall is pushing federal legislation; the Wildlife Corridors Conservation Act, that would direct federal agencies to collaborate with each other as well as tribes, private landowners and others to protect wildlife corridors.

Rep. Deb Haaland (D-N.M.) addressed the group, noting that the passenger pigeon that once darkened the skies with untold numbers is now extinct. Animals, she said, don’t have a voice. “It’s up to us to protect them,” she said.

“When we talk about wildlife corridors, that means that animals that live by instinct should be able to move where they need to go, get the sustenance they need, so they can survive, so they can be a part of our culture and our history,” she added.

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Stephanie Garcia Richard, New Mexico Commissioner of Public Lands, said she perceived the event as being about protecting that which is vulnerable and essential.

“I’m not [here] to recommit not only myself, but [also] the State Land Office to be a partner” in protecting wildlife corridors, Garcia Richard said.

Jeremy Vesbach, a member of the New Mexico State Game Commission, said he believes addressing wildlife corridors is a positive move and will require cooperation across borders. “We have a big job ahead of us, but it’s a good time to take it on,” Vesbach pointed out.

Lesli Allison, executive director of the Western Landowners Alliance, said private lands are often the most biologically diverse and provide critical elk and deer winter habitat. She emphasized that whatever is done to take care of wildlife must also address the economic reality of what it takes to keep private lands intact.

Allison said the prospect of “designating” wildlife corridors makes private landowners nervous, as opposed to recognizing that they exist. She said that when a landowner walks into a room and sees a map with a big red circle that has their ranch in it, it’s seldom good news.

“Let’s make it good news,” Allison said.

In closing remarks, Jesse Deubel, executive director of the New Mexico Wildlife Federation, called the event an excellent opportunity for people to get together and get a better understanding of the wildlife corridors issue.

“But the work does continue,” Deubel said. “Attending this summit and participating in this summit is not the end of the work, rather it’s just the beginning.”

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