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## **New Mexico Environment Department & EPA Announce Watershed Restoration Efforts Underway In Tres Lagunas Fire Area of Pecos River Canyon**

**Terrero, NM** – Environment and Forestry Officials from the state and federal government gathered this afternoon in Pecos Canyon to view firsthand the watershed and water quality impacts from this summer's Tres Lagunas fire and discussed efforts underway to address these issues.

Cabinet Secretary-designate Ryan Flynn noted, "Based on our experience with previous fires such as Cerro Grande in 2000, we know that the fire, smoke, and the immediate impacts are just the first issue with forest fires. Increased erosion from burned areas brings vast quantities of sediment and ash into our rivers and streams, damaging the water quality that supports fishing and other recreational activities. We intend to make whatever resources we have available to restore flood-damaged areas."

Officials were able to see these impacts up close at Brush Ranch, a private property along the banks of Pecos River north of Pecos NM. Larry Lujan, the owner of the property, described how recent monsoon rains flooded a side canyon. The flood left thick piles of sediment behind on the Brush Ranch Property and within the Pecos River.

The Upper Pecos Watershed Association (<http://www.pecoswatershed.org/>) is already working to address the impact of the Tres Lagunas fire on the Pecos River. Founded in 2006, the Association has been working collaboratively with local landowners to plan and implement projects to improve water quality and stream habitat on the Pecos River. The Association efforts have been supported by federal Clean Water Act funding administered by the New Mexico Environment Department. Since the fire, the Association has been working with State and Federal officials to evaluate and mitigate potential flood hazards in the watershed.

While the dramatic impacts from floods are expected to diminish in the next few years, the water quality impacts from the fire may last a decade or longer. State and Federal officials are preparing to address this challenge.

Nancy Stoner, US EPA Acting Assistant Administrator for Water, who is in Santa Fe for a national water quality conference, added that, "It is a tragedy to see so many forests and rivers impacted in such a short period of time, but this type of nonpoint source pollution emergency was anticipated in EPA's recently revised guidelines for Clean Water Act (CWA) Section 319 funds, to allow states to act quickly when water quality is clearly threatened." EPA's new Guidelines provides States with an opportunity to use CWA funds to complete post-fire restoration activities to reduce non-point source pollution without the development of a watershed based plan, which is typically required.

In addition, EPA's revised guidelines also call for more coordination among other federal and state programs to address nonpoint source pollution problems. The Emergency Watershed Protection (EWP)

Program, administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), is one such program. EWP responds to emergencies created by natural disaster and is designed to help people and conserve natural resources by relieving imminent hazards to life and property caused by floods, fires, windstorms, and other natural occurrences.

At the State level, Cabinet Secretary-designate Ryan Flynn has directed his staff to revise the state's Nonpoint Source Management Plan that governs how the State administers these federal funds. "Given the number and severity of forest fires in the last three years, I have asked the Surface Water Quality Bureau to work with NRCS, the US Forest Service, and other stakeholders to collaborate on restoration and watershed protection. The Environment Department is launching a revision of this key planning document to allow for quicker and more coordinated response in the future. With these revisions, the Environment Department will be able to sponsor projects, assist local sponsors, or increase the size and effectiveness of Emergency Watershed Protection efforts."

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