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Office of State's Natural Resources Trustee Completes Groundwater and Habitat Restoration Projects near Albuquerque Totaling \$881,000

ALBUQUERQUE, New Mexico, - The State's Natural Resources Trustee, Ron Curry, announces the completion of three resource restoration projects totaling \$881,000 in the Middle Rio Grande corridor. All three projects were funded from a settlement between the New Mexico Office of Natural Resources Trustee (ONRT), the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway.

"These settlements are the result of years of effort and negotiations by the state to obtain compensation for New Mexico's environmental resource damages," Governor Bill Richardson said. "Projects like these restore and protect our groundwater resource, balance our ecosystems and help provide habitat for wildlife."

"We must continue to pursue these initiatives because of our state's limited water resources," said State Natural Resources Trustee Ron Curry. "These restoration projects – which are paid for by responsible parties rather than taxpayers – are the main focus of the Office of the Natural Resources Trustee."

The settlement was for injuries to groundwater and habitat natural resources that resulted from activities at the Railway's Albuquerque Tie Treater facility. Settlements for natural resource injuries are used by the Trustee to restore, replace or acquire the equivalent of the natural resources injured.

As restoration for injured habitat resources, the ONRT funded the City of Albuquerque Open Space Division to revegetate, with low-water use plants, approximately 200 acres of land in the Rio Grande Valley State Park. The \$290,000 project was implemented primarily on land that ONRT had previously cleared of invasive plants. Over 7,000 native trees and shrubs consisting of cottonwoods, New Mexico olives, wolfberries, screwbean mesquites, four-wing saltbush, golden currants, coyote willows, seepwillows, and peach-leaf willows were planted in the southern portion of the Park. Native mix grasses were planted on approximately 50 acres of meadows along with sedges and rushes planted on over 20 acres. In addition, three existing wetland areas were enhanced to attract more wildlife.

The objective of this restoration project was to restore wildlife habitat along both banks of the Rio Grande. The new vegetation will provide shelter, food, and nesting habitat for birds and other wildlife.

The ONRT provided \$91,000 for a collaborative groundwater restoration project with the Bernalillo County Public Works Department. The project, implemented by the Public Works Department, connected residences in the South Valley to municipal sanitary sewer and/or water systems. ONRT targeted those households that currently use septic systems or domestic drinking water wells and whose residents did not qualify for existing County connection programs. The objectives of the project were twofold: (1) protect groundwater from future contamination by decreasing the use of septic systems, and (2) decrease the demand for groundwater by switching users from private wells (which use groundwater) to a municipal supply (which frequently uses surface water). The project funded installation of a sewer trunk line as well as the connection of 11 households to sewer lines and municipal water systems and the abandonment of their septic systems.

In the bosque at Isleta Pueblo, ONRT funded the removal of water hungry invasive plant species. The \$500,000 groundwater restoration project successfully treated more than 400 acres of land which was approximately double the acreage originally estimated. Plants such as salt cedar consume large amounts of groundwater and negatively impact the quality of the groundwater. Other benefits from the implementation of this project included reduction of fire danger, opportunity for expansion of native vegetation, and improvement of wildlife habitat, aesthetics, and recreation. Isleta Pueblo implemented the removal of the invasive plants, and will continue to maintain the suppression of invasive plants into the future. The Mid-Region Council of Governments provided assistance to ONRT as to the location in the bosque most in need of restoration.

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