

CLEARING THE WATERS

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NRCS Can Fund Stream and Wetland Restoration through EQIP

By Abe Franklin, WPS Program Manager

The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) hosted an information-packed State Technical Committee meeting in November 2019, during which an NRCS employee stated that Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) funds can be used to support construction of certain types of “Zeedyk structures,” under NRCS Conservation Practice 643. This article provides more insight into the rules and opportunities for using EQIP funds for stream and wetland restoration projects.

EQIP Basics

EQIP provides support for conservation practices on agricultural lands in New Mexico, including wetlands and riparian areas that are part of, within, or potentially impacted by an agricultural operation. Eligible applicants are agricultural producers. Eligible lands are typically private agricultural lands, but grazing permittees can sometimes qualify for EQIP funds on public land. Any information not easily found on the web can be found at several regional and area NRCS offices around the state, where NRCS staff are ready to help potential applicants understand their programs.

EQIP is used to fund “Conservation Practices” that will address a resource concern. Conservation Practice 410, for example, corresponds to “Grade Stabilization Structure.” Within each Conservation Practice are several “scenarios” that present different approaches, or types of structures, that implement the Conservation Practice. A “Payment

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Schedule” maintained by NRCS lists the dollar amounts that NRCS can pay producers for implementing Conservation Practices. Payment Schedules vary by state and by year. The following table lists several items in the Fiscal Year 2020 New Mexico NRCS Payment Schedule.

Code	Practice	Component	Units	Unit Cost
382	Fence	Wildlife Exclusion	Foot	\$4.48
391	Riparian Forest Buffer	Bare-root, hand planted	Acre	\$1,474.58
395	Stream Habitat Improvement and Management	Rock and Wood Structures	Acre	\$18,802.75
410	Grade Stabilization Structure	Log Drop Structures	Number	\$4,038.93
410	Grade Stabilization Structure	Rock and Brush Structure/Zuni Bowls	Cubic Yard	\$92.22
410	Grade Stabilization Structure	Rock Dam	Square Foot	\$8.41
410	Grade Stabilization Structure	Rock Drop Structures	Square Foot	\$104.41
410	Grade Stabilization Structure	Rock Drop Structures - remote locations	Square Foot	\$123.16
643	Restoration of Rare or Declining Natural Communities	Beaver Dam Analogues or Post-Assisted Log Structures	Linear foot	\$26.57
643	Restoration of Rare or Declining Natural Communities	Rock Structures	Number	\$494.12

NRCS is able to compensate Historically Underserved (HU) producers at a higher rate than the unit costs provided above, as further detailed in the Payment Schedule. Conservation Practices generally cost producers more than NRCS can pay. EQIP is considered a voluntary conservation program that offers farmers and ranchers financial and technical assistance to implement conservation practices on working agricultural land. Unlike some federal funding programs, NRCS does not require producers to report matching funds or in-kind labor.

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Specification Sheets and Technical Notes

NRCS maintains extensive guidance on what may be funded under EQIP, mostly in a “Field Office Technical Guide” (FOTG) maintained by each state. (See “Navigating the FOTG,” below.)

Navigating the FOTG

1. Go to <https://efotg.sc.egov.usda.gov>.
2. Select the state you are interested in from the drop-down list and click “submit.”
3. Click “Section IV.”
4. Click “Conservation Practices.”
5. An alphabetic list of Conservation Practices appears. Several documents are available under each of these.

The most detailed information that clarifies expectations for applicants and NRCS staff, for a structure, is the “Specification Sheet.” However, according to Jeremy Maestas of the NRCS West National Technology Support Center in Oregon, “individual state NRCS offices may not have experience with these structures or may not have developed their own detailed Specification Sheets yet. States can choose to adopt national templates or borrow from other states, which is typically done.”



Beaver Dam Analog example provided in a Specification Sheet in New Mexico's FOTG.

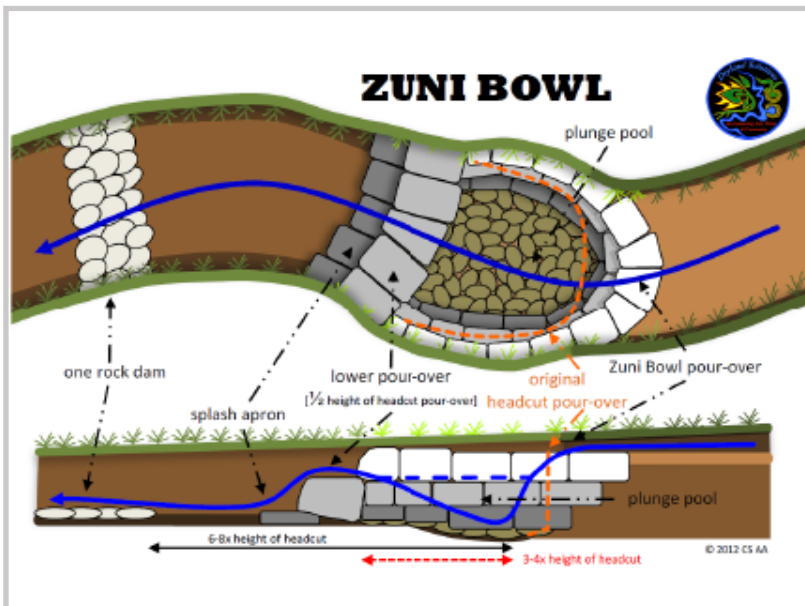
Until recently, New Mexico producers who were interested in erosion control structures such as one-rock dams were uncertain that NRCS could fund their construction. In July, New Mexico NRCS staff updated New Mexico's FOTG to further clarify eligibility of specific structures for funding under EQIP. Beaver dam analogs, post-assisted log structures, one-rock dams, Zuni bowls, rock mulch rundowns, media lunas, and log and fabric step-falls are all now included in Specification Sheets under Practice 643.

In the end, potential EQIP applicants should work with local NRCS staff to explore eligibility of structures not clearly described in the FOTG or to clarify the crosswalk between the payment schedule and specific types of structures. NRCS staff are ready to help potential ap-

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plicants evaluate their project ideas, determine eligibility, and guide them towards effective approaches to conserve soil, protect water quality, and improve aquatic, riparian, and wetland habitat.

Will this article help you develop a project? Have you or someone you know implemented some of these innovative practices with support from NRCS? We'd like to know. Please email susan.styer@state.nm.us with information.



Acknowledgments: The author thanks Kenneth Branch, Steve Kadas, Santiago Misquez, and Jeremy Maestas (all with NRCS) for answering questions and reviewing this article prior to publication.



Left - Schematics of a Zuni bowl in New Mexico's Specification Sheet for Conservation Practice 643 ("Restoration of Rare or Declining Natural Communities")

Right - Herbaceous riparian planting: *carex sp.* (sedge) mat are described under Conservation Practice Specifications for Riparian Herbaceous Cover (Code 390).



Rio Chama, Rio Arriba County, NM

Above - "Conservation Practice Specification Stream Habitat Improvement and Management (Code 395) purpose is to maintain, improve or restore physical, chemical and biological functions of a stream, and its associated riparian zone, necessary for meeting the life history requirements of desired aquatic species. This practice applies to all streams and their adjoining backwaters, floodplains, associated wetlands, and riparian areas where geomorphic conditions or habitat deficiencies limit reproduction, growth, survival and diversity of aquatic species."

Nine New River Stewardship Program Projects Underway !

Nine new projects funded through the River Stewardship Program were approved in June, with final administrative approvals completed in July. Here is a short summary of each.



Adair Spring Restoration

The Upper Gila Watershed Alliance will fence Adair Spring and a half mile of spring-fed creek on the Gila National Forest to protect them from livestock. Adair Spring and its creek are a refugium for Rio Grande sucker, near the San Francisco River a few miles south of the town of Luna in Catron County.

Animas River Habitat Enhancement and Bank Stabilization Project

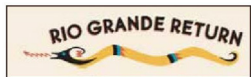
The City of Aztec will replace failed bank stabilization structures with properly designed structures, remove hazardous debris (broken concrete, metal rebar, car parts), remove non-native Russian olive trees, and plant native riparian vegetation on city-owned property used for boating and other recreation.



Riparian Restoration in Torreon Wash Watershed

The Rio Puerco Alliance (RPA) will continue to enhance the riparian habitat of Torreon Wash near the community of Ojo Encino, in the Rio Puerco watershed. RPA and cooperators will plant at least 3,000 cottonwoods, 1,000 willows or other riparian shrubs, fence them, and install erosion control structures in planting areas.

Valle de Oro National Wildlife Refuge Unit 2 Wetland Development and Water Quality Improvement Project



Rio Grande Return will construct riparian and wetland habitat on 25 of 60 acres of wetlands planned within Unit 2 of the Valle de Oro National Wildlife Refuge in Albuquerque's South Valley.

Wetland and Stream Restoration of Lower Jaramillo Creek

Jaramillo Creek and the East Fork Jemez River on the Valles Caldera National Preserve don't meet State Water Quality standards for nutrients and turbidity. In this project, Keystone Restoration Ecology will reduce incision of lower Jaramillo Creek, increasing the nutrient and sediment processing capacity of adjacent wetlands.



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Restoration of Trout Habitat on the Cimarron River

In this project, the Cimarron Watershed Alliance will improve overwintering habitat for resident brown trout and create holding areas for stocked rainbow trout within the Cimarron Canyon State Park. They will increase the number and depth of pools, decrease channel width-to-depth ratios, and provide fish refugia during low-flow conditions by installing boulder cross-vanes and large woody debris.



Rewinding the Gallinas River in the City of Las Vegas – Phase II



This project will continue work by the Hermit's Peak Watershed Alliance (HPWA) to transform the Gallinas River in Las Vegas into a healthy, functioning river and an amenity for Las Vegas residents.

HPWA will build rock structures to restore natural sinuosity, pool-riffle-run complexes, floodplain connectivity and appropriate width-to-depth ratio, install nearby basins to treat urban runoff, and plant native riparian vegetation.



Santa Fe River Restoration Project

The Santa Fe Watershed Association will build a rain garden along the Santa Fe River Trail adjacent to East Alameda Street, and will build Zuni bowls at the end of Camino Escondido in the Canyon Road neighborhood. Both of these actions will slow runoff, reduce erosion, and reduce *E. coli* loading from impervious surfaces to the Santa Fe River.

Pecos River Cowles Restoration Project

In this project, the Upper Pecos Watershed Association will protect the banks of the high-use reach of the Pecos River near Cowles Ponds, through construction and placement of in-stream rock and woody debris structures and restoration of vegetative buffers. These actions will encourage channel narrowing and vegetation establishment in areas exposed to excessive foot traffic, and will reduce fine sediment loading to the Pecos River from the parking area and footpaths.



More information on these new River Stewardship Program projects is available at https://www.env.nm.gov/surface-water-quality/nmed_319_and_rsp_project_list.

UPDATES FROM THE SWQB MONITORING, ASSESSMENT AND STANDARDS SECTION

MONITORING TEAM NEWS

Surface Water Quality Bureau staff returned to the field in May to conduct water quality sampling at 14 stations in the Upper Pecos Watershed. COVID-Safe Practices were followed while conducting field activities. A special thanks to Sarah Holcomb of the Point Source Regulation Section for making comfortable and stylish protective face coverings! Sample submittal at the Department of Health Scientific Laboratory followed a modified intake procedure with 12 feet of social distance and the reduced transmission of paperwork, all of which worked flawlessly.

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Sampling will continue in the Upper Pecos Watershed and with the assistance of Watershed Protection Section staff sampling has resumed in the Mimbres, Gila, and San Francisco watersheds. Sampling will be reduced and re-prioritized with the new safety guidelines in place to protect SWQB staff and New Mexico area residents during the pandemic.

WATER QUALITY STANDARDS TEAM NEWS

On April 9, 2020, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) approved revisions to the State's *Standards for Interstate and Intrastate Surface Waters* (20.6.4 NMAC) that were adopted by the Water Quality Control Commission (WQCC). These amendments were based on findings from a Use Attainability Analysis prepared by Peabody Natural Resource Company which, with oversight from the Surface Water Quality Bureau, investigated the highest attainable uses for San Isidro Arroyo, Mulatto Canyon, Arroyo Tinaja and Doctor Arroyo in and around Lee Ranch Mine in McKinley County near Milan. EPA's approval now makes these revisions effective for Clean Water Act purposes.

Amendments to 20.6.4 NMAC that provide for a Temporary Water Quality Standard for plant nutrient threshold concentrations from the City of Raton's Wastewater Treatment Plant to Doggett Creek was approved by the Commission during a public hearing on March 10. This amendment became effective for State purposes on May 22, 2020 and has been submitted to EPA for review and approval for purposes of the Clean Water Act.

A hearing will be held before the WQCC on November 10, 2020, for nominating the upper Pecos River (from Dalton day use area to the wilderness boundary), and tributaries, as an Outstanding National Resource Waters under 20.6.4.9 NMAC. If approved the designation would provide the highest level of surface water quality protection under the State's antidegradation policy. This nomination is being brought forth by San Miguel County, Village of Pecos, New Mexico Acequia Association, Molino de la Isla Organics LLC, and Upper Pecos Watershed Association. More information can be found at the WQCC's website.

TMDL/ASSESSMENT TEAM NEWS

Following a thorough validation and verification process, SWQB uploaded the data from the 2017-2018 water quality surveys of the Upper Rio Grande and San Juan River watersheds to the EPA's Water Quality Portal. The upload contained over 50,000 results from 154 monitoring locations. The data from these surveys serve as the primary sources of information used to assess waters for the 2020-2022 Integrated Report (IR). A 45-day public comment period on the draft IR began on July 27 and will end on September 10, 2020. The IR is designed to satisfy the statutory requirements of the federal Clean Water Act, and to serve as a source of basic information on water quality and water pollution control programs in New Mexico. More information is available at <https://www.env.nm.gov/surface-water-quality/303d-305b/>.

On May 6, staff from the Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) and Assessment Team hosted a webinar for stakeholders to provide information and answer questions regarding proposed TMDLs for eight streams in the Chama River watershed. TMDLs describe stream impairments and pollution reduction targets needed to meet water quality standards. TMDLs can lead to new or revised limits for point source discharges and inform further watershed-based planning leading to restoration efforts. For more information, visit the "What's New?" section of the SWQB webpage at <https://www.env.nm.gov/surface-water-quality/>.

EVENTS & ANNOUNCEMENTS

September

September 4th - September 6th - Limestone Canyon, San Mateo Mountains. Join Albuquerque Wildlife Federation volunteer restoration service project at Limestone Canyon. For additional details or to sign up: Contact Scial at rioscial@gmail.com or abq.nmwildlife.org/projects.html. **IMPORTANT:** This project is subject to change or cancellation based on state public health restrictions. If you RSVP to attend, we will keep you updated about the project status. Our restoration project will follow AWF's Covid-19 safety protocols, so please review them ahead of the project to familiarize yourself with all the details.

September 10th - NMED SWQB - Deadline for comments on draft *2020-2022 State of New Mexico Clean Water Act (CWA) 303(d)/ 305(b) Integrated List of Assessed Surface Waters* (www.env.nm.gov/surface-water-quality/303d-305b).

September 18th - September 19th - Silver City - VIRTUAL - 16th Annual Gila River Festival. Over the course of the two-day festival, we will meet online for an inspiring keynote presentation with author, agricultural ecologist and ethnobotanist Gary Paul Nabhan, panel discussions, trainings, virtual guided hikes, networking, music, poetry, the Wild and Scenic Film Festival, and more. For additional details or to sign up: www.gilariverfestival.org/.

September 18th - September 20th - Wolf Creek, near Ft. Union, NM.

Join Albuquerque Wildlife Federation volunteer restoration service project at Wolf Creek. For additional details or to sign up: Contact Scial at rioscial@gmail.com or abq.nmwildlife.org/projects.html. **IMPORTANT:** This project is subject to change or cancellation based on state public health restrictions. If you RSVP to attend, we will keep you updated about the project status. Our restoration project will follow AWF's Covid-19 safety protocols, so please review them ahead of the project to familiarize yourself with all the details.

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