

Mercedes: Land Grant and Tribal Communities Uniquely Positioned to Restructure Wildfire Management in New Mexico

By Dawni Bennett

Forestry management in Northern New Mexico has been fraught with disasters, both natural and institutional. Cultivating distant corporate interests rather than local resources, the Forest Service in the first half of the 20th century ensured that wealth grew for East Coast Anglos while land grant heirs and tribal members withered in poverty. Lucrative timber leases went to multinational corporations such as Hanson PLC rather than to inhabitants within the boundaries of their inherited community mercedes. Resentment flourished, and the Forest Service was blamed for the continuing economic marginalization of the area.

Civil disobedience ignited in the second half of the 20th century, as a moratorium was enacted in 1995 impacting essential fuelwood gathering for land grant heir's heating of their homes. Old growth clear cutting endangered the habitat of the Mexican spotted owl, and the Forest Service adopted a 'No Action' policy inhibiting timber collection with the goal of "protecting snags and downed log's in the owl's critical habitat and in riparian zones" ***High Country News Feb. 3, 1997, issue 98***. Anecdotally, local inhabitants contested that without ongoing active management such as fuel reduction, as much timber would be lost to wildfires as had been lost to logging.

The intervening decades provide ample evidence supporting the anecdote, as research concluded that in "forests which have long dry seasons each year and have easily combusted forest floors, such as ponderosa pine, mixed conifer and dried Douglas fir.... active management of some type is needed..." ***Basic principles of forest fuel reduction treatments, James K. Agge, Carl N. Skinner, 2005, 84***. In contrast, the moratorium had created a policy of 'No action'. The decade since the moratorium bore out that "'No action' is not a risk-free option, as dry climates regularly predispose forests to burn in a typical dry summer" and "The impacts of 'No Action' in dry forest ecosystems must incorporate the probability of stand-replacing, intense fire where stand density has increased and dead fuel accumulated in excess of historic level." ***Ibid, 94***. Furthermore, "Fuel reduction efforts that remove fuel ladders are effective in reducing fire hazard and are thus important to broadly maintain the forest structure that provides habitat for nesting Mexican spotted owls." ***Fire ecology volume 18, 2002, article number: 31***. Whereas old growth clear cutting dislocated the spotted owl last century, stand replacing severe fires due to fuel buildup currently pose a similar threat.

Land Grant Associations garnered the attention of Congress and, in 2005, many of their claims to communal lands- much of which are now federal, public lands- were at last officially recognized. At the behest of Land Grant Associations such as the San Joaquin del Rio de Chama Merced/Land Grant (<https://riodechamalandgrant.com/>) in Rio Arriba County, extensive studies demonstrating the how the shift in land use has led to economic decline of the area, as well as possible mitigations for that decline. The SjdRC study found that "...it is apparent that many

working families leave the study area because of the lack of employment opportunity. In order to reverse the out migration pattern of young land grant families, in the area, strategic economic development opportunities need to be developed."

https://storage.googleapis.com/wzukusers/user-34646419/documents/5cbdf36a0226cFmOSKMb/SJDRC%20ComprehensivePlan_final.pdf, 11.

Proposed mitigations include a return to traditional uses and active management of the community land grant area, in which:

"...the Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management play a critical role in establishing collaborative partnerships with the LG to expand grazing and timber production, as well as other material harvesting to assist in providing stability to the economic conditions that current federal policies are having on rural northern New Mexico, *ibid 13*, and "The LG opposes any additional wilderness designation or any other type of federal designation in the former common lands, which will lead to degradation of the watershed because of the restrictions on active management practices that are important to maintaining a healthy forest and watershed." *ibid, 15*.

Fuel reduction activities include active management via two traditional use practices of Land Grants- fuelwood gathering and grazing. Land grants, now affiliated with the New Mexico State Government, routinely gather timber and distribute it to heirs for home heating, with funding for equipment from public sources.

In addition, with their rural location proximate to grazing allotments on public lands, land grants heirs are uniquely positioned to further restructure wildfire management through targeted grazing. "The targeted grazing approach... involves manually herding cattle into the more rugged and remote areas of fine fuel build-up" <https://www.farmprogress.com/farm-business/nmsu-grazing-research-could-influence-wildfire-management-strategies>, *jrodman, 6*. Such grazing is "able to reduce the abundance of fine fuels in the target area by half, even though the site was located in steep, rugged terrain and was almost two miles from water" *ibid, 7*.

Models of the economic viability of targeted grazing already exist in the west, both publicly and privately. For example, every summer the owners of Alderspring Ranch in Montana employ interns on horseback to herd cattle, and as a recent season wound down, recounted that "For our horseback crew living with beeves, it's a time of mixed emotions as well. On one hand, they put a great summer in; their grazing tour went further into the wilds than ever before. On the other, it's time to start the trip back home before colder weather and early snow hits" *Alderspring Ranch, August 30, 2023 Email*.

The interns experienced "total immersion in a culture that they never knew existed--of people that actually live with their cattle on the land, sleeping on the ground, out there... In the wind. In the rain, snow, lightning, hail and heat. Stuck with people who they never met, on horses they never met even more (some interns had hardly been on the back of a horse), living with

400 beeves who humans will actually breathe in rhythm to at night as they are right there, just outside the tent, bedded down next to camp to be safe from wolves. Those thrust-upon relationships forge a bond with man, woman and beast that they never would have known were possible. And I think that it is the way it should be. Something important, everyday, but not ever needing to be mundane; this thing we call food. It should never be without some sort of relationship. Relationship to the people, and the animals from whence it came. But even more-so to the land itself. We've lost that for the most part in our culture. The interns found it again this summer, and I think it shocked some of them."

Alderspring Ranch, September 27, 2023 Email

In addition to existing private models, there are numerous public resources available, both in terms of funding and of implementation. For example, the New Mexico Wilderness Alliance of Albuquerque, NM, was awarded \$35,475 to fund the Outdoor Academy, which "seeks to increase vocational job opportunities in rural communities for local youth, especially employment that incorporates traditional land use practices. Through training and mentorship, youth learn to break through existing cultural and financial barriers to benefit from our state's robust outdoor economy."

<https://edd.newmexico.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/OEF-FY24.pdf>, 6.

Furthermore, "Last summer, Amigos Bravos hired Arden Foster for a grant-funded Range Rider position. Arden worked up in Midnight Meadows in coordination with Amigos Bravos, USFS, the grazing permittees, and Keystone Restoration Ecology. Keystone Restoration Ecology is Amigos Bravos' restoration contractor who was working up in Midnight Meadows, in the headwaters of the Red River, installing a large-scale restoration project to reconnect Bitter Creek to the floodplain and surrounding wetland areas. Arden's primary role as a Range Rider was to monitor grazing cattle and to keep them in the correct pastures and away from the active restoration work. She also helped repair damaged fencing in an effort to better manage the cattle and keep them in the appropriate grazing allotment."

<https://www.facebook.com/AmigosBravos/posts/pfbid0suhvTPAn2x5Vkf2ioUggy9duj7BrjunWGQjqzftFU9q6QmYV1gZQDtPf9zCLVtGl>.

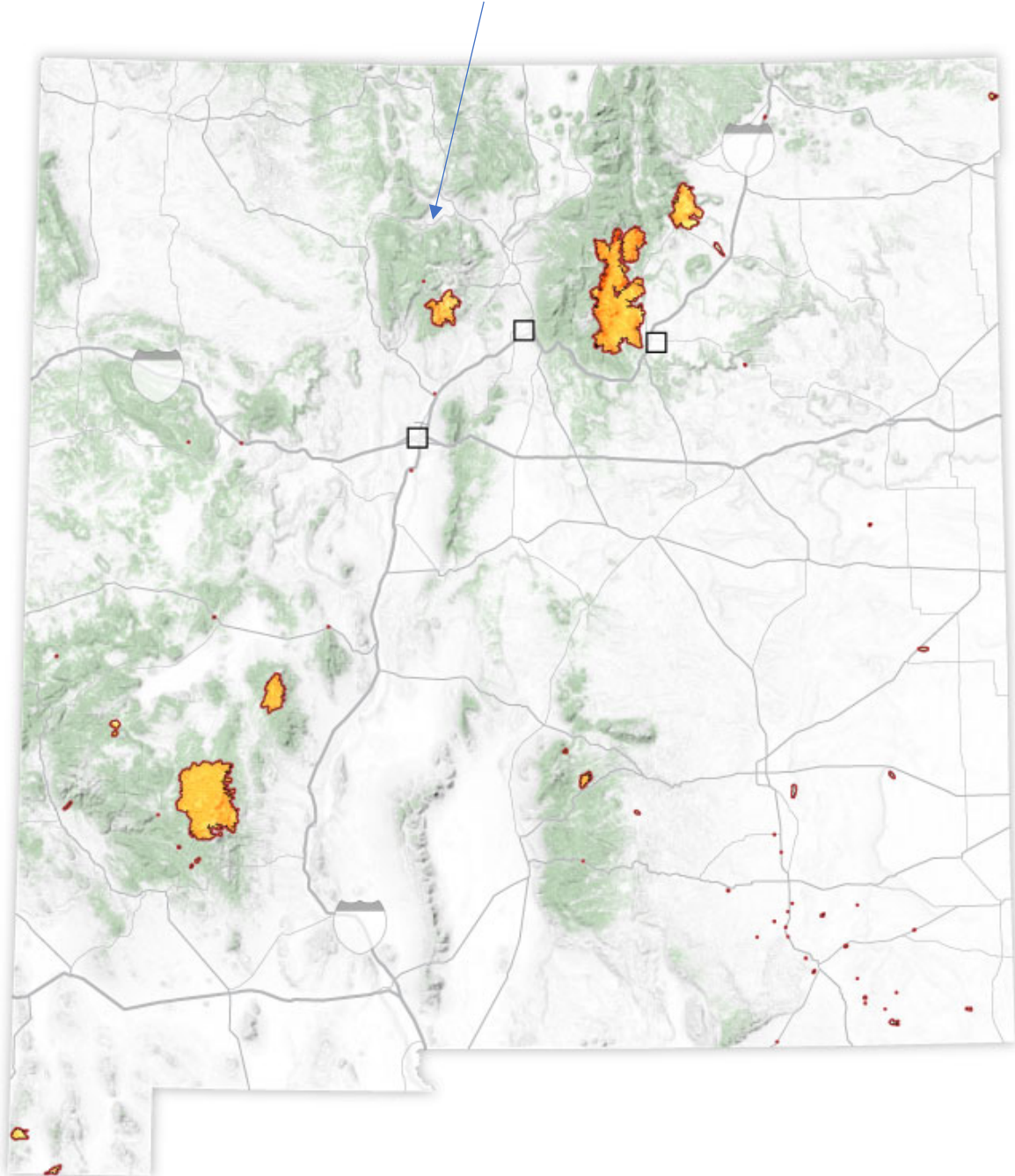
Additionally, "In 2006, the US Congress established the Northern Río Grande National Heritage Area (NRGNHA) (Río Arriba, Santa Fe, and Taos counties) to help tribal and local governments and other public and private entities conserve and sustain cultural, historical, archaeological, and natural resources." ***<https://riograndenha.org/>.***

Also, federal funding exists, as recent investment in sustainability have grown rapidly:

<https://www.blm.gov/press-release/blm-allocates-9-million-president-bidens-investing-america-agenda-build-resilient>.

The means and model for targeting grazing in New Mexico already exist. The adoption of- or return to- targeted grazing will benefit both New Mexico's tinder- dry forests and land grant communities. It is worth noting that in the spring of 2022, one of the worst wildfire seasons

ever in New Mexico, the National Forest lands within the traditional use boundary of, and actively managed by, the SJDRC Community Land Grant, were untouched by wildfires. Fire perimeters through May 31, 2022. Source: National Interagency Fire Center. SJDRC Community Land Grant active management area, approximate:



<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/06/01/climate/new-mexico-wildfires.html>