

**Otero Working Group
Conference Call
April 8, 2020**

Attendance

Rick Merrick, South Central Mountains RC&D, Otero Working Group Facilitator
Nick Smokovich, NM State Forestry Division, Capitan Office
Frank Silva, NM State Forestry Division, Capitan Office
Matt Clements, NM State Forestry Division, Capitan Office
Dave Venable, Mayor, Village of Cloudcroft
Sue Dreikosen, FEMA
Sid Gordon, NMSU Cooperative Extension, Otero County
Alan Barton, NM Forest & Watershed Restoration Institute, Las Vegas

COVID-19 Conditions

This meeting was held during the outbreak of the novel coronavirus and COVID-19 disease, when restrictions were in place on gatherings and social distancing was encouraged. Members of the Otero Working Group have discussed the current situation with COVID-19, and have determined it was important to keep the group together in some way and not cancel meetings. They're optimistic that when things settle down, they can hit the ground running.

Agenda

Used the agenda from the cancelled Feb. 2020 meeting, with some additions.

Watershed Focus Areas

Nick – Timeline on Watershed Funds: Had to cancel one of the projects as the money was reallocated to a district doing work on private land. The idea of the project is to work on all lands, cross boundary, to reduce fuel loads. This funding program was crafted to circumvent the Anti-Donation Clause, but this requires a lot of bureaucracy to carry out.

These projects don't have a specific timeline – they don't want to start projects continuously, but anytime someone has a proposal for a project, they can submit it for consideration. They need to look broadly at different lands – SLO, BLM. With the FS injunction, things don't look so good; recent conversations suggest this will be in place for awhile. In addition to the WildEarth Guardians lawsuit, the Center for Biological Diversity has filed a notice of intent to sue regarding the MSO, and protection of PACs.

The coronavirus is affecting contractors, even though their crews are working outdoors. Some projects, e.g. riparian restoration, are being shut down.

Frank – Because the State has been losing money, it's uncertain where the funds for these projects will be moving forward.

Nick – the legislation is in place, but how much money the State can contribute with oil revenues way down, is uncertain.

Matt – what was the organization filing the lawsuit and when did this lawsuit come down?

Nick – The Center for Biological Diversity is the organization filing suit, and Nick heard about it yesterday, but he isn't sure when the Notice of Intent was filed.

Sid – the CBD lawsuit is another obstacle.

Rick – Given all this, how do we go forward? From the SLO and BLM side, we knew we would take some hits on the money in the future, but we wanted to be sure the money we had been allocated would come to us and not get lost to redistribution. But, going forward, what does this group need to do and where do we need to focus?

Nick – We got the info from Mark Meyers of the State Land Office the other day about Circle Cross, Phase II – the material coming off of this project will help local industry and contractors. There is a hold-up with their biologists, but there are no concerns about shutdowns on this project.

The BLM funds, there has been a warning that there may be cuts to their funds.

Rick – Things look good, these funds aren't caught up in the MSO stuff. We need to look at individual responsibilities and readjust our thinking, so that we're not putting all of our focus on USFS lands. Instead, we should look at private lands or other federal lands, and get projects in these areas that are shovel ready. This may open up opportunities if projects elsewhere are shut down, the money may be redirected to our projects.

FARA Funds

Nick – Nick got an additional \$500,000 for projects on the Mescalero Reservation, from previous State watershed funds prior to the FARA funds.

The Mescalero Reservation is closed to the outside world – their casinos, campgrounds, and all public areas are closed. Their crews are still operating, however, using social distancing. Once the State funds are allocated to them, the Tribal Council will move forward with watershed restoration.

State Forest Action Plan

Nick – Has a conference call tomorrow and will know more, but they're still trying to meet the June deadline. There was a meeting in ABQ prior to COVID, with breakout groups on each part of the plan. The group leaders are working on compiling the info, along with the contractor. There is not draft yet but it's well on its way.

Grants

Rick – Regarding NM Association of Counties grants, the RC&D has been notified that NMAC is looking at extensions on timelines – these typically are due in June following the state's fiscal year.

CFRP grants also are on hold. With the virus and the MSO injunction, things are backing up and could get crazy if things open up.

Frank – we're all just trying to muddle through this.

Sue – A lot of things have been extended on time, as everyone is on standstill. Need to ask each grantor for deadlines. Everything is being delayed.

Rick – haven't heard anything on 2020 CFRP grants. Older grants are shut down. The status of CFRP is unknown right now.

Sue – re EMPT grants, the application process has been extended for 2 months.

Rick – some grants have been extended for an additional 3 months, like the CWPP grants.

CWPP

Rick – unsure if the date to submit the updates will be extended. It is usually in Sept.

Nick – this is all new territory, so it's unclear what will happen. No one wants to extend things too long, but there are bottlenecks. Unsure how long the COVID restrictions will be in place – they may continue through the Fall. Issue of when the committees can meet, and how they can meet, to make decisions about the proposals.

Frank and Nick – NFL and WUI grants were not extended. The deadline was April 3, and they did not change this. But this was just to get the grants in, even if they aren't complete. All the basic info had to be in, but there is wiggle room to make some changes.

Rick – we should stay on track with CWPP info, and plan on submitting it in Sept.

Need to continue working with Sue and Dave on funding due in June, although there may be an extension.

May 14 is the new date on the CWPP public meeting (it was scheduled for today).

Currently, April 30 is the projected date for things to open up again from COVID.

NFL Projects

Frank – 2 NFL grant proposals were submitted for Otero County. One is near the Two Goats project, to fill in some gaps. The other is near the ski area. They're looking to match projects the Forest Service is doing in the area.

Coleman Ranch – An NFL grant was approved quite awhile ago, but getting it off the ground for various reasons has been delayed. Getting close. There is other private land adjoining this that they may be able to do all together.

Lincoln NF Plan Revision

Nick – New release this morning – the comment period for wilderness evaluation map for Lincoln NF Forest Plan Revision has been extended.

Nick has commented saying that before any new areas are designated as wilderness, there should be a full restoration of the area.

Frank – how do you get on the site?

Nick – will forward email to Rick to send out to group with link to get on the site.

Rick – will Cloudcroft make comments on this?

Dave – No, the Village hasn't been involved.

Rick – was asked by the Forest Service how to get Otero County involved in the comment period.

Sid – this has come up in meetings; Sid is on many boards and committees, and there are some Forest Service personnel who have been diligent about making it to meetings, but they are not present at many things. If they want Otero County feedback, all they have to do is reach out to the County and ask for comments.

The County Commissioners also don't show up to meetings. But the Forest Service needs to get out of their office and go ask people to comment. Just posting on Facebook is not going to work, they need to make a deliberate effort to ask people.

Rick – will pass this up the line. Rick didn't want to speak for Otero County.

Rick – The MSO injunction is tied to Forest Plan Revision. They Forest Service needs to get a plan together to get the injunction off the table.

Fire Season

Rick – the most important thing he's talked about with Nick: Fire season is here. There was a fire in Timburon a couple weeks ago that burned 5 acres. This was a wake-up call. We haven't had the normal Firewise outreach this year, because many of the usual events have been cancelled. Lots of people are out in the woods to get out of the house or quarantining themselves. They are out there having campfires, it is a dangerous situation.

How to continue Firewise information dissemination? Get on the radio? Signs going up the mountain? Need to get people who are quarantining themselves in the mountains aware of issues.

Sue – there is no emergency alert system right now that works in the mountains. It will be a challenge to reach people. We don't know who is in the forest and we don't have any way to contact them. Don't have the capability right now to use an emergency management notification to cell phones. All campgrounds are closed, and people are dispersed in the forest.

We're in fire season, everyone knows it. People who are home should be spending this time cleaning up the land around their homes, at least, to remove flammable materials. People can't be out too much.

Nick – Just finishing up Wildfire Awareness Week – a lot of info that would ordinarily be available to the public has not been available this year. Everyone's relying on social media, but this doesn't get a message out to everyone.

Lots of info going out over NM Fire Info on email, about how to reduce wildfire risk. But, this isn't getting put into hands of everyone. They used to put placemats in restaurants, but they can't do that today as restaurants are closed due to COVID. They're not getting the same level of knowledge shared to those who need it most.

Matt – Regarding readiness response, Matt talked to JW from the Lincoln NF SO yesterday, and the Forest Service resources are teleworking. They're on a 2-hour callback, so resources are available. BLM is still on and working out of station. They will have updates tomorrow. Lincoln OES, they're getting less response from their volunteers coming out to fires, and probably will continue to drop. Fuel moistures are still pretty decent, even with winds. Fires in the past couple of weeks have been light. Starting to see grasses green up. 9 fires in past couple of weeks, none over 20 acres. They Weather Service keeps changing their outlook. Hopefully the area will get some moisture this week.

Rick – need to keep talking about all this, without raising too much alarm, we need to talk calmly about all of this. What can we do to notify people? How do we get people cleaning up around their homes, putting out campfires, etc.? Who has all this info? How do we get signs up on roads, posters up where people will see them?

Nick – can suggest to put info out. Wendy Mason, State Forestry's PIO, basically uses social media sites. Physical signage isn't happening. Nick will ask at teleconference tomorrow.

Issue: Last thing we need is a large "project fire" that requires a camp of firefighters. This will spread disease and reduce capacity.

Everyone needs to do their part to prevent emergencies.

Rick – see if Wendy can put something out there to all the radio stations

Dave let everyone know that Highway 244 between Cloudcroft and Ruidoso is shut down across the Mescalero Reservation.

End of Meeting. Stay safe.