

**From forests to faucets:**

**Connecting the dots in the wake of New Mexico's most catastrophic wildfire season**

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From the Track, the Pacheco Canyon and the Las Conchas fires in the northern part of the state to the Miller, Quail Ridge, and Ruidoso Downs fires in the state's southern tier, New Mexico is emerging from its most severe wildfire season ever. Given prevailing climate patterns, it is generally considered that a season like the one we just experienced will be more the norm than an exception. Importantly, according to wildfire experts, the Gallinas watershed is precariously positioned for a severe wildfire – it's just a matter of time. When it occurs, the impacts to the city of Las Vegas and citizens and businesses in northern New Mexico will be devastating.

This is not some alarmist, *chicken little* scenario. A drive to Raton (the 2011 Track Fire) or Los Alamos (the 2011 Las Conchas Fire), for example, should invoke a real sense of urgency here in Las Vegas.

As with many concepts (e.g., sustainability), there appear to be three legs to securing the city's water supply: (1) obtaining additional water rights; (2) repairing/building infrastructure (e.g., dams, filtration systems); and (3) working at the source through watershed restoration. The city is doing its best with the first two. It is also at the table on discussions about the third leg – representing the 14,000 plus citizens in the city who rely on the Gallinas watershed for their very existence.

A group was formed several months ago to take on the third leg. For now, let's call it the Gallinas Watershed Action Group (the GWAG), the key word being *action*. This is not another expensive study telling us something that we already know, where the authors disclaim any and all results, absolving themselves of any responsibility for what they've done or recommendations they've made – the now perfunctory punch line to any expensive, commissioned study. While still evolving, the science and experiences of fire personnel on the ground is already pretty solid – forest restoration can work. Despite widespread damage, immediate post-burn assessments in 2011 suggest that efforts to restore the health of our forests, including restoration thinnings, have been effective in cooling off some wildfires. Restoration efforts have also provided a safe and effective zone from which strategic fire suppression efforts have been successfully initiated.

The GWAG's sole objective is *improving the health and safety of the Gallinas watershed by mitigating the potential for catastrophic wildfire and securing a more certain and sustainable water supply to the City of Las Vegas through forest restoration*. This involves developing and *implementing* a comprehensive, cohesive, and connected

watershed-scale restoration strategy in which we all have a vested interest. There are already isolated restoration efforts in the Gallinas and neighboring watersheds, achieving small-scale restoration thinnings while employing a handful of hard working individuals. Unfortunately, severe wildfires often occur at the landscape scale and demonstrate little respect for well-intentioned small-scale treatments or property boundaries.

However, forest restoration alone is not a panacea and restoration treatments come with a maintenance bill that is often ignored. That is, the effectiveness of these treatments is not permanent and, in many cases, “maintenance cycles” are poorly understood. In addition, publicly-funded forest restoration programs should be viewed as ways to stimulate sustainable restoration-based economies, not replace them. The best outcome of these programs would be the development of a strong local, sustainable forestry sector that no longer relies on government subsidies and that enables forest restoration by providing markets to consume woody material from restoration thinnings and other harvests. A strong forestry sector also provides employment in some of the state’s poorest rural areas – like northern New Mexico. The push of public subsidies to achieve forest restoration objectives is likely not sustainable, and once the forest restoration grants dry up and the bills for future forest restoration maintenance come due, the state may find itself with a subsidy-dependent forest restoration culture and without a viable restoration-based economy.

Finally, for those citizens of Las Vegas who need a reminder of where their water comes from, just look north. It may look green now, but given the state’s most recent wildfire season, there are no guarantees about its future – a future that pivots on the implementation of a comprehensive watershed restoration strategy enabled by a strong local forestry sector.