Final Town Hall Report

Looking To the Future:
A Town Hall on New Mexico's Watersheds and Forests

November 28-29, 2005
New Mexico Highlands University
Las Vegas, New Mexico

New Mexico First convened the town hall, ***"Looking to the Future: A Town Hall on New Mexico's Watersheds and Forests,"*** on behalf of the New Mexico Energy, Minerals and Natural Resources Department, the New Mexico Department of Agriculture, and the New Mexico Forest and Watershed Restoration Institute. The purpose of the town hall was to discuss watershed issues and make recommendations to public policy leaders about how best to implement New Mexico's two most recently adopted statewide strategic plans for watershed management: The Forest and Watershed Health Plan (FWHP) and The Non-native Phreatophyte/Watershed Management Plan (NNPP). Participants were also asked to consider how the proposed activities of the new federal Forest and Watershed Restoration Institute at New Mexico Highlands University (FWRI) can be integrated into the implementation of the Plans. The town hall was attended by 130 people, including participants, observers, and staff. Participants included environmental activists, farmers and ranchers, representatives of Soil and Water Conservation Districts, government officials, and others who care about watershed issues.

Participants identified goals for watershed management and ways stakeholders can be involved in achieving those goals. Following two days of rigorous work in discussion panels, including a plenary session led by former Governor Garrey Carruthers, the participants produced recommendations that will serve as the basis for initiatives that will be developed by an implementation team.

This document contains the town hall's **final recommendations** as well as summaries of the discussion groups' **consensus statements** developed during their deliberations.

Final Recommendations

1. Watershed restoration that considers both water quality and quantity must be a statewide priority. Practical, prudent and economically viable watershed restoration rehabilitation methods must be implemented in a truly collaborative manner at the local level that ensures real work will be done at the ground level and that incentives are created for private, foundation, and/or public investment in watershed restoration benefiting community development and economic development.

2. Watershed management plans should be implemented at the local level through an appropriate agency or organization and be defined by hydrologic boundaries rather than political boundaries. Those agencies or organizations should be allowed to draw from all sources of funding. In many cases the Soil and Water Conservation District may be best positioned to play the implementation role. A broadly representative advisory body appointed by the governor should capture and communicate the learning from local initiatives, coordinate related efforts, evaluate programmatic efficiencies and structure and provide strategic directions.

3. Establish an effective and responsive line of communication that is maintained among federal, state, tribal and local governments, (incl. acequia associations and land grants). Include all stakeholders in the process of setting priorities for statewide watershed restoration projects using a coordinated resource management process where it is appropriate.

4. Support the New Mexico Forest and Watershed Restoration Institute (FWRI) headquartered at New Mexico Highlands University and ensure that the institute's activities address all facets of the state's watersheds.

5. Implement the Plans as currently written with emphasis on information coordination and public outreach by reconfiguring existing financial and human resources to be more efficient without creating a new layer of unnecessary bureaucracy.

6. Establish a clearinghouse to develop, collect, and house a multi-level information sharing system to include spatial data and any other data related to restoration. It should create open software, coordinate search capabilities, and have a training component. These information systems should provide technical data that is centrally located on the Internet and is in a standardized format that the public can access, use, understand, and to which it can contribute. There should also be a clearinghouse on information concerning the use of woody biomass and other byproducts for higher economic value to increase economic value and to restore soil health. If FWRI is fully funded it would be an appropriate entity for these functions.

7. Create a consistent format for biological and economic evaluation and monitoring with a repository at FWRI. Monitoring should be standardized among State Forestry, the New Mexico Environment Department, and other agencies collecting data. Feedback from the monitoring needs to be an important factor for future planning and tweaking of the restoration process to incorporate what was learned.

8. Agencies should prioritize and institutionalize programs and decision-making processes that are transparent, collaborative, sustainable, embracing of grassroots input, independent of political fluctuations, and that balance science, values, and policy.

9. The state should require municipalities and county governments to incorporate principles of watershed restoration in land use planning and subdivision regulations. Examples are protecting groundwater recharge, active flood plains and surface water.

10. Build New Mexico's capacity as well as citizen and political support for watershed restoration and forestry by developing, funding and implementing:

- K-12 watershed education in accordance with state standards and benchmarks;
- Forestry degree programs in one or more of the New Mexico colleges or universities that are accredited by the Society of American Foresters;
- Public outreach on a long term, sustained basis, by a variety of stakeholder organizations (government agencies, watershed groups, etc.) such as showcasing successes, demonstration projects, field tours, museum activities, and public service announcements.

11. Create separate, recurring line items in the state budget to fund administration and implementation of FWRI, the Non-Native Phreatophyte/Watershed Management Plan, the Forest and Watershed Health Plan, and related projects. The funding would also pay for on the ground work, including planning, treatment, restoration, education and monitoring. Pursue additional forms of funding, to include federal, private and others.

12. Implement new and existing projects and policies that will restore ecological and community capacity, the objective being to create resilient watersheds that function within the natural range of variability and address other resource values (e.g. viable populations of native species, water quality, recreation, etc.).

13. Plan and implement restoration projects on a watershed basis, giving local entities power to implement objectives that include community and economic development, using a transparent collaborative process that includes planning, implementation, monitoring and adaptive management at the landscape and large watershed level including strategy and goals, and on a project level.

Consensus Statements

The following sections summarize the consensus statements developed by participants in their discussion groups. These consensus statements were used to develop policy recommendations, so in many cases the content below mirrors the recommendations above.

The Importance of Watershed Restoration

The town hall participants agreed that every person, whether he or she lives on a ranch, a small town or a large city, lives in a watershed. Watersheds are hydrological features that define stream basins throughout the state, and the town hall participants agreed they are important in New Mexico's history, culture and economy. Healthy watersheds benefit people, animals and plant life. They provide soil protection and aquifer recharge. They protect clean water supplies, promote fire safety, and increase bio-diversity. They allow for human needs, including agriculture, business development, and other community objectives, including public health and compliance with interstate compact compliance.

Goals for New Mexico's Watersheds

The town hall participants want New Mexico's watersheds to be well-functioning and resilient enough to adjust to the natural variability of climate for this arid region, including fire. Participants agreed that watershed restoration should aim to produce optimal and sustainable water flow, restore surface and ground water quality and increase water quantity. Goals emerged in four major areas:

- Watersheds should provide for a variety of human social and economic uses, including livestock production, low-impact recreation and other sustainable economic and cultural uses. They should be managed to maximize public safety through fire and flood risk management, public health, water quality and quantity, and utilization of waste products.
- Watershed management should utilize the best known practices. That means the use of various scientific metrics, local knowledge, and traditions. Research might prioritize mapping to monitor soil erosion, spring and creek flows, and watershed responses in varying weather conditions.
- Planning and funding for management of watersheds should be incorporated in overall public policy planning, including land use and economic development. Funding should be appropriately allocated. Management strategies should be flexible to accommodate different climate and ecological zones within the state.
- Decisions about watershed restoration should be locally driven and collaborative. Goals should reflect the needs and efforts of local watershed groups and acequia associations, and should benefit local communities. Education and public awareness programs should be produced for citizens, school children and decision-makers.

Leadership

Town hall participants identified several criteria for implementation and integration of the Forest and Watershed Health Plan developed by the state Energy, Minerals and Natural Resources Department and the Non-Native Phreatophyte /Watershed Management Plan developed by an inter-agency work group under the leadership of the state Department of Agriculture. Participants agreed that the political leadership in New Mexico needs to give a higher priority to watershed restoration.

The town hall participants also agreed that New Mexico can achieve political, financial, and citizen support for the long term restoration of watersheds by developing an inclusive, collaborative system with strong educational, outreach and involvement programs.

A comprehensive program of watershed restoration requires that it be a priority of the state political leadership: the governor, cabinet agencies and the legislature. Participants indicated that a well-organized system of state and local stakeholder, watershed and advisory groups is essential to maintaining the needed emphasis on watershed restoration, including a state-level policy advisory board. State leaders should look to existing networks and organizations, such as acequias and Soil and Water Conservation Districts, to build local watershed restoration capacity.

Implementation

The plans should be implemented across jurisdictions, town hall participants said, and should be closely coordinated among the two state agencies and the FWRI, based at New Mexico Highlands University. Stable and adequate levels of funding must come from appropriate sources and revenues should be focused on supporting on-the-ground projects.

Administrative costs would be minimized whenever feasible through use of existing agency structures operating under a strong system of coordination.

Many town hall participants felt that the agencies and institute must collaborate with all necessary stakeholders, those with direct and indirect interest in healthy watersheds, especially land managers, acequia associations, and soil and water conservation districts. Collaboration would include identification of existing local watershed groups, and include an ongoing public involvement process. A rigorous monitoring program to measure the efficacy of watershed restoration programs should be enacted, and should include publicly available and usable databases.

Stakeholders' Roles

Town hall participants agreed that watershed restoration and management requires the participation of many stakeholder and stewardship groups, all of which must embrace a holistic view of watershed issues and an understanding of their specific strengths and roles. They must demonstrate a commitment to communication, collaboration and consensus for taking action. Town hall participants suggested the following roles:

- Citizens can support watershed restoration plans, become aware of the issues, and participate in local groups involved in watershed restoration. Citizens can also influence politicians to support and fund watershed restoration planning and implementation.
- Farmers, ranchers, private landowners and the groups who represent them can plan and implement restoration measures on their lands. They can provide education about watersheds to their neighbors and members. As land owners or lessees, they are in a strong position to implement pilot or full restoration projects and seek out partnerships with other public and private stakeholders.
- The business community can explore how watershed restoration projects and related watershed products can benefit their companies and the economy as a whole. They can also support restoration by offering financial and logistical support for groups.
- Environmental and conservation groups can become involved in the planning and monitoring of programs through technical support, funding and grant writing, sponsoring demonstration projects and field trips, and supporting administrators.
- The research community can provide the basic research data upon which decisions will be made. Properly funded, they can act as a basic data resource to policy leaders, prepare useful information materials, evaluate policy options and compare alternatives. The FWRI at Highlands University can be supported by the research community.
- Acequia managers and users can become involved in the local planning process and be pro-active in implementation. As water rights and land owners, acequia associations are in a strong position to leverage watershed restoration projects. They can work to educate the public about the benefits of watershed restoration; provide matching labor, equipment of funding for projects, and restore and maintain their acequia systems. They can take advantage of resources that are available to them.
- Soil and water conservation districts have substantial capacity to provide technical and financial support for on-the-ground projects on private, state, tribal and federal land. SWCDs are in a strong position to lead many local efforts in watershed planning, project implementation, provide education and community outreach.
- Tribal governments can demonstrate leadership and innovation in watershed restoration on their own lands and with neighboring landowners. Tribal governments can choose to allow access to tribal lands for research, develop internal natural resources and policy expertise, and provide a liaison in collaborative processes. They can also work to educate all other stakeholders about the meaning and importance of tribal sovereignty.
- State and local governments can initiate funding, sponsor collaborative watershed groups, integrate cross-jurisdictional activities, provide technical support such as geographic information systems, and support a Society of American Foresters-accredited forestry program in one of the NM colleges or universities. Local governments can develop new resource management departments and create local ordinances to take advantage of watershed products, requiring fuels management on private lands, and providing grants. They can also utilize zoning authority to harmonize real estate development with the watershed function.

- The federal government can play a lead role in funding, implementation and scientific monitoring of watershed restoration programs. It can also create flexible funding rules to encourage collaboration among all classes of landowners.

Conclusion

The town hall produced many concrete suggestions, and participants demonstrated that people from different walks of life could develop agreement about practical solutions to watershed management issues. For additional information on this or other New Mexico First town halls, please contact the office at:

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