

Otero County Working Group

2014-2015 ANNUAL REPORT

Collaborative Process to Achieve Watershed Restoration

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Background

The Otero Working Group had been meeting monthly and effectively coordinating among state and federal agencies to identify and implement forestry and fuels reduction projects. However, the group wanted to expand project planning and implementation to watershed scale, to broaden activities beyond fire and fuels reduction, to engage additional partners, and to become more strategic in developing working group program of work.

The group came up with a specific list of activities they wanted my help through the New Mexico Forest and Watershed Restoration Institute (NMFWRRI) contract. These included:

- Creation of a mission statement for the working group
- Identify stakeholders and create a comprehensive email list
- Identify partners and create a comprehensive email list
- Assist the group in prioritization of future implementation areas
- Education and Outreach - develop newspaper articles and a PowerPoint and develop a webpage or work with RC&D to place information about the group and what they do on that website
- Economic development - develop a list of wood users and/or contractors that would take raw wood or slash off of projects

Issues

Long-term drought conditions in New Mexico have contributed to increased fire activity throughout the state. Lack of winter snow melt combined with higher than normal temperatures, has resulted in fires burning hotter, growing faster and burning in areas that historically would not have burned. Therefore, the need to treat vegetation, through thinning and prescribed burning, across the landscape has become increasingly important. Recent fires in Otero County (Mayhill- 2011, Acrey-2011, and Donelson-2012) and the Little Bear Fire that burned in adjacent Lincoln County in 2012, highlight this need. Treatment beyond higher

elevation densely vegetated areas to include grassland and shrub-dominated wildland urban interface areas (WUI) is essential.

Additionally, the drought conditions have affected the water quantity and quality (i.e. post-fire flooding) of many of the communities in the county. The need to treat vegetation beyond the communities themselves, to address these critical water issues, has been recognized. It is clear that activities (thinning, prescribed burning, stream stabilization, range management,...) need to be implemented at a larger scale to benefit these communities.

Planning and implementation of vegetative treatments at the watershed scale, while most effective in addressing these concerns, requires working across landscapes and the involvement and support of multiple landowners. This increase in collaboration adds complexity to any treatment as project objectives, communication capacity, regulations (i.e. federal vs. state vs. private) and understanding, vary by landownership. Adding to this complexity is the fact that many of the residents throughout the communities in Otero County, are summer-only residents. Greater project complexity, augments the time and costs needed to accomplish these projects. Unfortunately, funding to accomplish this work across the agencies (federal, state, county and municipal) continues to decline.

Given the increasing need for treatments across landscapes and the decline in funding available for this work, the importance of coordinating and collaborating among various landowners is even more critical.

Collaborative Process

It was evident that the working group was interested in collaborating in order to accomplish watershed-scale restoration. The working group agreed to meet more frequently in order to capitalize on the availability of NMFWR and its resources. To reflect this landscape scale approach, the working group wanted to develop a mission statement that clearly expressed the expansion from fire and fuels reduction to watershed health and restoration. As a group, we reviewed examples of mission statements and highlighted general characteristics of a good mission statement. The group broke up into smaller groups to develop a mission statement. We then reconvened and collectively put into one mission statement the various components from all groups. This draft was sent out to the entire working group and another meeting was spent on reviewing, revising and finalizing the mission statement.

Mission Statement

Collaborate with communities, partners, and stakeholders to strategically plan, develop, and leverage resources in order to enhance the resiliency and restoration of Otero County Watersheds thru:

- 1) Sharing of Responsibilities
- 2) Improvement of Forest Health and Sustainability
- 3) Promotion of Economic Development Opportunities

Given the size of the county, stakeholders and partners vary from one part of the county to another. In order to identify potential stakeholders, partners and prioritize future implementation areas, we first needed to have a common understanding amongst the working group members of the locations where previous work had been completed, where current work was on-going and where future work was already in the planning process and why these areas had been selected in the past.

Each of the landowner representatives sent past, present and future planned data to NMFWRI to display on one map (2004 – present) along with 5th and 6th code watershed boundaries. The Focal Area/Fire Risk Analysis Mapping done by State Forestry and The Nature Conservancy was displayed alongside this map so that the working

group could see what areas within the county had been identified, through this analysis process, as areas of highest fire risk as well as areas of greatest priority taking into account fire risk, water quality and supply, economic opportunity, forest health and fish and wildlife by State Forestry and The Nature Conservancy (Appendix A). The working group also reviewed the recently updated Community Wildfire



Projection Plan (CWPP) which identified the communities of highest fire risk. Each agency/organization was asked to review maps and then draw their priority areas following watershed boundaries on the NMFWRI created map. For agencies/organizations that had more than one representative present, they were asked to come up with one set of priority areas.

The working group then looked at various priority areas drawn on the map and discussion followed on size and continuity of priority area/s and the importance of having clear rationale for including areas that were not identified as priority in the focal area/fire risk analysis map. The working group selected criteria and used them to identify a few priority options ranging from one large priority area to 2-3 smaller ones. At the next meeting we further refined the priority area (Appendix B).

Given the regular number of participants in the working group, we decided to form a smaller group made up of representatives from this working group that would meet bi-monthly to prepare for the regular working group meetings and serve to identify key strategy and steps necessary for the working group to move forward. This smaller group included representatives from State Forestry, RC&D, USFS, Mescalero Tribe and BIA. This smaller group is known as the Planning Group and meets bi-monthly.

Once the priority area was refined, the group selected various focus areas that were identified as areas of highest priority to accomplish work within the approximately 500,000 acre priority project area (See Appendix C). The group reviewed and refined focus areas and ended up with five focus areas including: 1) Two Goats-High Rolls-Maruchi; 2) Sacramento River; 3) Cloudcroft and State Roads 82 and 130; 4) Jim Lewis; and 5) Rio Penasco. Potential partners and stakeholders were identified for each of the focus areas. Given the potential partnerships, work already completed and on-going and high fire risk, the group agreed to start with the Two Goats-High Rolls-Maruchi Focus Area (See Appendix D). Individuals were contacted and invited to attend a working group meeting to discuss potential opportunities for collaboration. Two field trips occurred, one to the Maruchi area and one to the Two Goats project area. During this latter field trip photos were taken. The field trip pictures, along with information about the working group, were shared with the USFS Lincoln National Forest to include in one of the future monthly newsletters normally distributed throughout the communities in the area.

Efforts are currently being made to determine the acreage and cost of projects already completed by working group organizations/agencies within this Focus Area. The working group believes that by gathering this information it can better communicate, to outside agencies and organizations, the extent of collaboration and investment that has already occurred. This information will also facilitate the working group's ability to identify the funding needs to complete the remaining watershed restoration work in this focus area.

The group has also made great strides in learning about various types of agreements and funding opportunities through presentations made at the working group meetings by representatives from various organizations. Relevant potential funding sources that the group has become aware of include: Interstate Steam Commission, Collaborative Forestry Restoration Program (CFRP), Wildfire Risk Reduction Grant, Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program (CFLRP), Joint Chiefs' Initiative, New Mexico Forest Industry Association (NMFIA) Stewardship agreement, National Wild Turkey Federation (NWTf), and the Tribal Participating Agreement.

Based on the participation and interest of new partners and participants in the working group, the Two Goats-High Rolls-Maruchi Focus Area was expanded to include the City of Alamogordo and the Holloman Airforce Base.

While continuing to gather information, expanding partnerships and identifying funding sources for projects by focus area, the group is now beginning to address the challenges and needs of the forest and wood products industries. Local forest and wood products businesses have struggled as the size and availability of wood has declined and distances to available sources of wood have increased. At the same time, the process for bidding and implementing contracts remains complicated and varies by agency and organization. Additional investment in new technologies and the development and marketing of innovative wood products are needed to compete with other national and international businesses.

The Otero County Working Group is partnering with the Greater Ruidoso Working Group to host a forest and wood products workshop next spring with the specific aim of augmenting the capacity of the local forest and wood products businesses in the Sacramento Mountain area.

Much of the efforts of the working group in this next year will be to continue to strategically plan and implement watershed based projects within the focus areas through expansion of partners and stakeholders from initial planning to final wood product development. The working group recognizes the importance of informing and engaging communities, partners and stakeholders. Coordinating the various initiatives and opportunities that arise is also critical to ensure that working group resources are utilized as efficiently as possible. The working group is also focusing on the leveraging of additional resources in order to enhance the resiliency and restoration of Otero County Watersheds.

Accomplishments

Emergency Preparedness and Response

- The Working Group, through a NMAC contract, completed the update of the Otero County Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP). Obtaining signatures from lead organization officials is the only task remaining in order to finalize the CWPP
- Efforts at establishing and enhancing Fire Wise program in various neighborhoods and communities continued and is on-going

Outreach and Education

- Through the involvement of NMFWRI, the working group was able to display priority planning efforts and share this information with the USFS Lincoln National Forest - Forest Leadership Team
- A storage house for key maps of the working group, was established on the All About Watersheds website, with the NMFWRI serving as administrator of the group site
- Summary minutes of meetings from the working group were posted on the All About Watersheds website

- Meeting participation expanded beyond the regular participants to include additional agency representatives (Otero SWCD), municipal representatives (Alamogordo), wood product industry representatives (Timberon Wood Products and) additional interested citizens
- Working group representatives actively engaged and provided working group project planning and implementation efforts with the Inter-State Stream Commission group
- Summary article about the working group and current activities and future plans, was written and submitted to the Lincoln National Forest for future Newsletter publication
- Initial contact was made with Rocky Mountain Research Station in order to incorporate scientific methods of water quality and quantity monitoring in the focus area projects

On-the-Ground Practices

- Mission statement was established to aid the group in clearly articulating and focusing the work it wants to accomplish on the group at the watershed scale
- Updated Map of the Vegetative Treatments within Otero County and the Two Goats – High Rolls-Maruchi Focus Area was developed and refined
- Two field trips were held in the Two Goats (view of project already accomplished) and the Maruchi (view of project in planning stage)

Economic Development

- Mapping Information was sent to The Nature Conservancy in order to complete Analysis and Mapping effort to provide Contractor and Wood Product Businesses Locations within the Priority Project Area
- Representatives from New Mexico Forest Industry Association (NMFIA), National Wild Turkey Federation (NWTF), and Mescalero Tribe presented information to the working group about on-going and potential future agreements, grants and opportunities to fund the on-going and future planned work within the focus areas identified by the working group
- Initial planning, in partnership with the Greater Ruidoso Group, has begun for the forest and wood products workshop scheduled for spring 2016

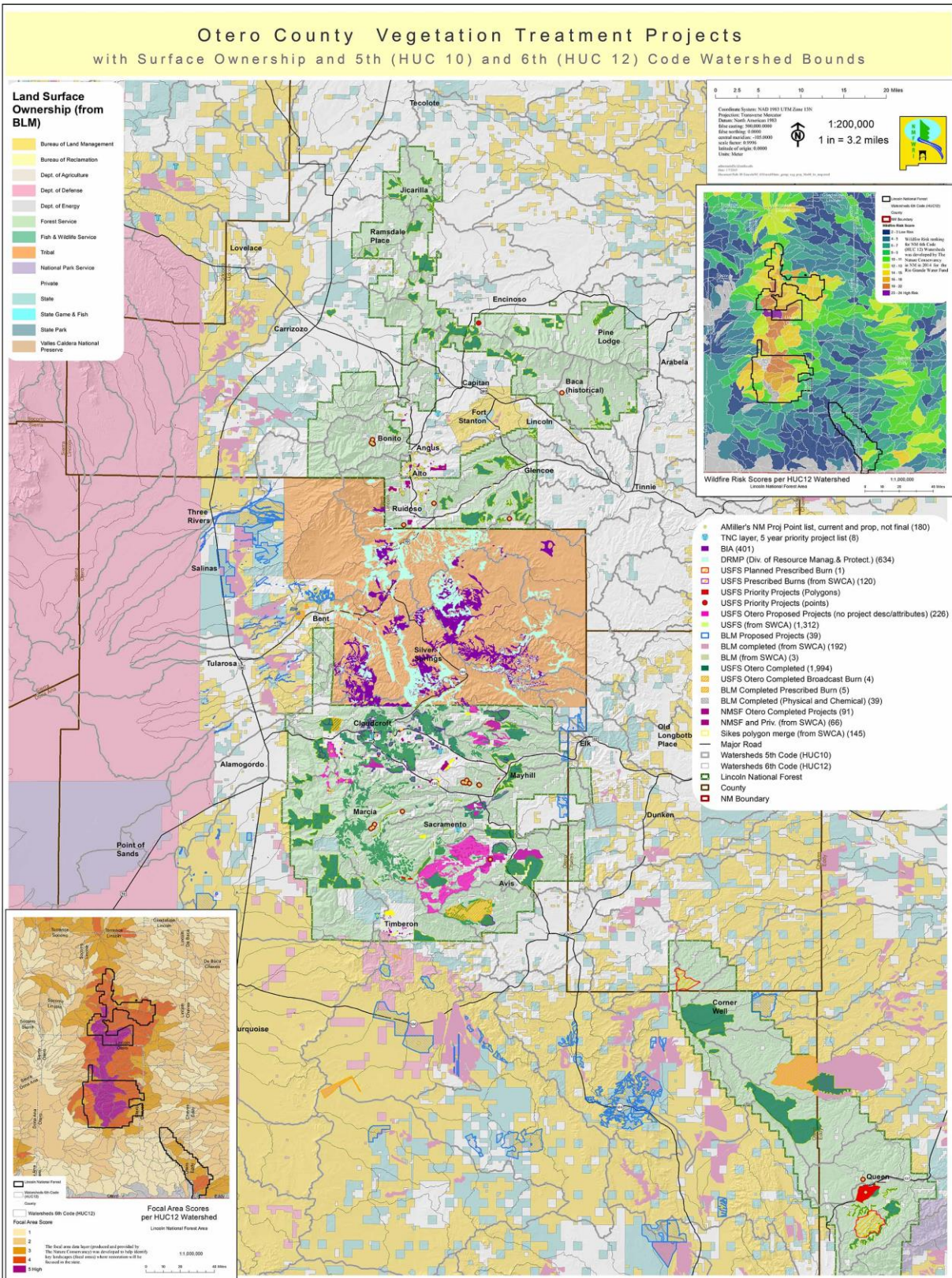
Recommendations for the Future

- Continue to support meetings of both the working group and planning group (smaller number of individuals from working group that do strategic planning and preparation for the working group meetings) on a bi-monthly basis

- Obtain final signatures for the Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP) to ensure that the CWPP is recognized and distributed to communities county-wide
- Continue to involve NMFWRP in mapping and GIS activities for the working group
- Identify, map, and summarize, for external outreach and sharing, the number of acres treated and planned and dollars for each of the focus areas beginning with Two Goats-High Rolls-Maruchi Focus Area
- Continue to expand the number of partners and stakeholder interested in the focus areas as projects and potential activities evolve
- Integrate watershed activities of the working group with efforts identified by the Inter-State Stream Commission, USFS Forest Plan Revision, USFS Travel Management Planning and other landscape scale watershed health-based initiatives that occur within the county
- Hold community and public meetings and distribute written information about the ongoing and planned work of the working group and share general information about the working group itself

Appendices

Appendix A



Appendix B

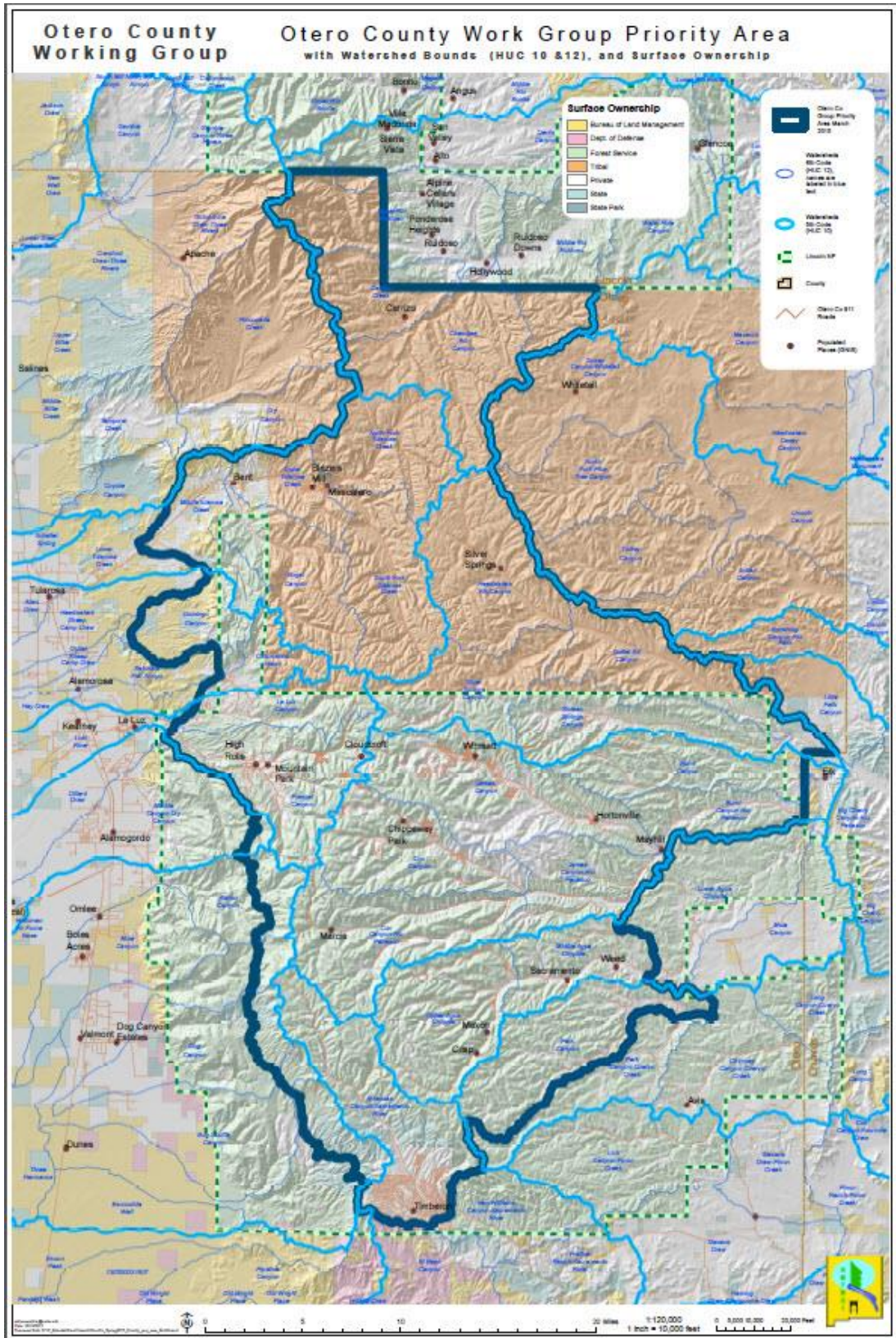
Otero County Working Group Priority Project Area Criteria

Group Exercise was completed to determine what criteria each participant used to identify watershed-based priority project area.

- Improve Water Quality and Quantity, as it relates to recharge of community water sources and stream channel restoration *
- Accessibility*
- Proximity to WUI *
- Prescribed Burn Opportunities *
- Areas Where People Live *
- High Fire Risk Areas *
- Potential for Treatment and/or Removal of Wood Products
- Vegetation Type *
(grass, pinyon-juniper, ponderosa pine, and mixed conifer)
- Condition of Vegetation, Limitation of Vegetation Types of High Importance Susceptible to Disturbance (riparian, mixes conifer)
- Areas bordering, close to or upstream from High Fire Risk Areas
- NEPA Planning Completed *
- Areas with Greatest Departure from Natural Fire Regime
- Areas Containing Threatened and Endangered Wildlife Species Habit
- Large Scale Planning Areas *
- Developed and Dispersed Recreation

* **Indicates criteria used to identify priority project area boundary**

Appendix C



Appendix D

