

Grant County Eco-Watershed Planning Group

2014-2015 Final Report

Collaborative Process to Achieve Watershed Restoration

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Background

The Grant County Eco-Watershed Planning Group was established in 2013. The chair of the group, County Commissioner Gabriel Ramos, invited representatives from the Forest Service, Wood Products Industry, Environmental Organizations and local community members to serve as voting members for the Planning Group for one term (One-Year). The main purpose of the group has been to provide recommendations to the county commissioners. Although voting is limited to the membership identified by the County Planning Group chair, meetings are open to the public. Other individuals from government agencies, non-profit organizations, wood products industry and community citizens, attended meetings throughout the 2013-2014 time period. The main benefit of this group, as identified by multiple members and meeting participants, has been to share information about what various organizations are doing within the county.

During 2014, heavy workloads and changes in organizational structure for some agency participants, among other reasons, contributed to the group not moving beyond an information-sharing capacity. During this same time period, participation was declining to the point that meeting quorums were not being met, resulting in meeting attendance rules being established. It was at this time, September 2014, that New Mexico Forest and Watershed Restoration Institute (NMFWR I) officially initiated its involvement in this group. NMFWR I proposed to assist the group in identifying a strategy and actions to improve watershed health within the county. The group agreed to have NMFWR I facilitate meetings and work closely with the chair of the group to structure the agenda and meetings to ensure progress in watershed health, particularly through collaboration with multiple partners, and identification of funding sources for planning and treatment of watersheds.

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 Grant County (Quail Ridge - 2011, Silver Fire - 2013) 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 (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, etc.) 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 treatment 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 Grant County are summer-only residents. Greater project complexity increases 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

Although participants had shared information about their organization/agency activities, jointly identifying and prioritizing areas for collaboration had not occurred. Additionally, there was not a single storage house area where planning group information was recorded, stored or mapped beyond meeting minutes. The County at this point did not have a Geographic Information System (GIS) specialist and it was identified as a barrier to collecting and displaying the planning group efforts.

The first step taken with the group therefore was to see how closely aligned individuals were regarding the priority watershed areas needing treatment within the county.

NMFWRI created a map displaying the county by land ownership and 5th and 6th code watersheds. Each individual was asked to put circle/circles on the map of their highest priority areas for treatment. We did not discuss ahead of time what criteria each individual was using to identify areas of highest priority. Once everyone had taken their turn, each member shared their criteria for identifying the priority areas. They included:

- areas where people live
- vegetation type
- areas with high fire risk

- areas potentially affected by fire upstream
- areas with structures and dwellings
- NEPA ready
- Priority Landscape area
- highest fire risk based on vegetation and proximity to WUI

Based on these criteria and the priority areas identified individually, we collectively came up with a priority area within the county that used 5th and 6th code watersheds as its boundary.

Planning Group members that had landownership responsibilities within the county provided data to NMFWRP on the locations of projects that were completed over the past ten years, projects that were on-going, and projects that were planned for the future. Additionally, the group reviewed two publications: 1) New Mexico Statewide Natural Resources Assessment and Strategy Response Plans; and 2) The Nature Conservancy Focal Area Analysis and Mapping. The statewide publication provided general information on priority areas within the state, while the Nature Conservancy publication provided watershed-based geographic priorities using weighted criteria of fire risk, water quality and supply, economic opportunity, forest health and fish and wildlife.

The initial project priority area was further refined incorporating landownership activities and assessment and analysis information (See Appendix A - Map). The project priority area identified was approximately 500,000 acres. While greatly reduced in size from a county-wide area of approximately 2.5 million acres, the group recognized that we needed to identify most critical areas within this 500,000 acre to initiate collaborative work.

The group then reviewed and refined criteria to identify focus areas within the project priority area. After multiple presentations, exercises and discussion, the group selected four focus areas that would serve as the starting point for project work within the priority project area. The four focus areas identified were: 1) Burro Mountain; 2) Pinos Altos - Silver City; 3) Georgetown; and 4) Upper Mimbres. The focus area deemed most critical (based on initial criteria along with potential for partnerships) to start watershed collaborative work was Pinos Altos - Silver City. The boundary area for this first area, Pinos Altos-Silver City Focus Area, was further refined in order to incorporate potential partners and have identifiable on-the-ground boundaries. (See Appendix B— Map of Pinos Altos-Silver City Focus Area)

We reviewed the potential partners and stakeholders list we had developed earlier in the process when initially establishing the Grant County Priority Project Area. In that earlier process we had placed groups in the categories that most closely matched their interests and abilities. The thematic area categories that groups were placed into were: 1) Emergency Preparedness and Response; 2) Education and Outreach; 3) On-the-Ground Practices; and 4) Economic Development. While it was recognized that this list was not a complete list of potential partners and stakeholders, it was a good initial step in identifying potential organizations and stakeholders to bring into the group (See Appendix C- Potential Partners and Stakeholders by Thematic Area). From this list, we identified individuals that were known to have

specific interest in the Pinos Altos-Silver City Focus Area. These individuals were invited to participate in the planning group and present their interest and current and potential future activities in the area.

At the next Grant County Eco-Watershed Planning Meeting, each member was asked to review the information shared by potential partners and stakeholders at the previous meeting. This information serves as the basis to identify specific areas of potential collaboration in the future for the Pinos Altos-Silver City Focus Area. This list of follow-up items could serve as a work plan for the group.

We also discussed potential funding sources for various activities and the current master agreements and initiatives that should be considered (i.e. Interstate Stream Commission, New Mexico Forest Industry Association (NMFIA) Master Agreement with USFS Southwestern Regional Office, Collaborative Forestry Restoration Program (CFRP), National Wild Turkey Federation Stewardship Agreement with USFS Southwestern Regional Office, New Mexico Association of Counties, and the Joint Chief's Initiative.

At the final meeting attended by NMFWRI, we reviewed the process we had gone through as a group from identifying a mutual area of interest, to determining potential partners and stakeholders, to including these potential partners and stakeholders in the planning process early on, and developing specific collaborative action items and identifying funding sources to achieve these plans. These same steps could be taken in each of the additional focus areas identified by the group.

Accomplishments

Emergency Preparedness and Response

- Because this group took the steps to identify past, current and future vegetative treatment projects by land ownership and put this information on one map in one GIS database, this information was ready and available when Grant County needed this information for the updating of the Grant County Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP).
- New Mexico Wildland Urban Interface Summit – This state-wide summit was held in April 2015. Many of the planning group members had key roles in presentations, field trip presentations and overall organization of the meeting. Presentations ranged from wildland fire assessments, to fuel thinning and prescriptions, to Fire-Wise Program and home assessments
- Coordination between Silver City and Grant County was initiated, to ensure consistency in development and implementation of city and county-wide Community Wildfire Protection Plans

Outreach and Education

- Through the involvement of NMFWRI, the planning group was able to display priority planning efforts and share this information with the County Commissioners
- A storage house for key maps of the planning 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 planning group were posted on the All About Watersheds website
- Meeting participation expanded beyond the regular participants to include additional agency representatives (NRCS and BLM), municipal representatives (Pinos Altos and Silver City), and additional interested citizens
- Partnership between Western New Mexico University (WNMU) and the planning group was initiated during this collaborative process. Assessment of GIS capabilities and needs of WNMU along with the potential training and support role of NMFWRI in GIS was identified
- Partnership Video developed by Oregon State University entitled “Collaborating for Healthy Forests” was presented to the group and highlights of the video were discussed

On-the-Ground Practices

- Updated Map of the Vegetative Treatments within Grant County and the Pinos Altos-Silver City Focus Area was developed
- 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

Economic Development

- Participation of thinning and wood product industry members in planning group membership
- Grant County and WNMU initiated discussions on the development of a certificate and associate degree program in Fire Science to aid in augmenting local employment

Recommendations for the Future

- After engaging with this group for nine months and participating within the boundaries of the current organizational structure (county led with membership, agenda, and decision-making by the county), it is clear that this group can continue to function in an information-sharing capacity. It is important that the County and the Planning Group members clearly understand their role to be an information sharing role, with decision –making limited to the County and the County Commissioners.

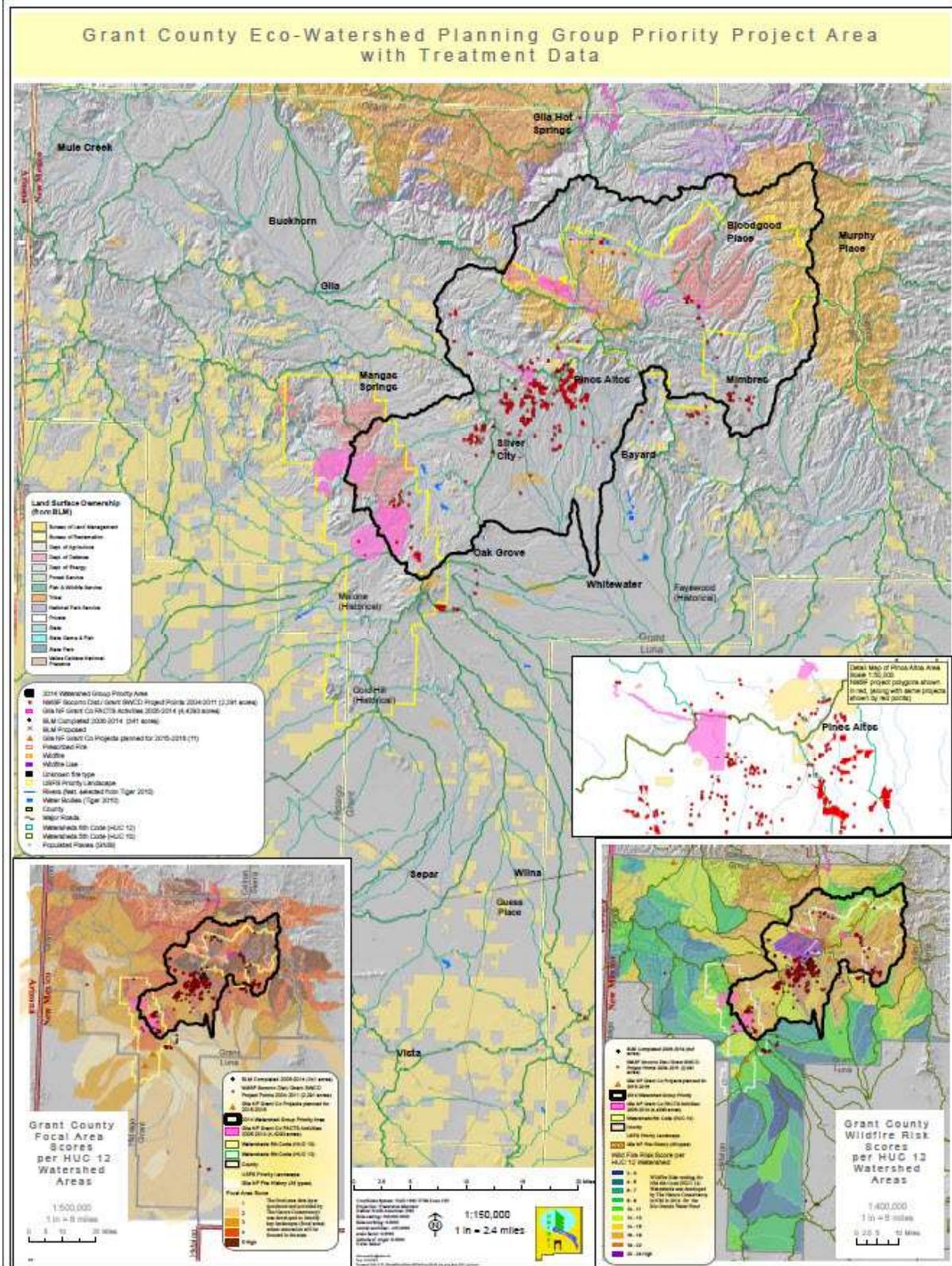
However, if the group wants to move beyond information sharing to collaboration-based watershed restoration (including collaborative planning and implementation), the organizational structure needs to be revised to be more inclusive in the participation and decision-making of current non-members. If the County deems it in its best interest to maintain the current organizational structure, another avenue needs to be identified to collaboratively address watershed-based issues and concerns. Two possible options to consider are: 1) Establish a watershed subgroup that does not have these same organizational restrictions and is led by an individual with natural resource and collaborative skills; 2) Use another collaboration-based avenue, that already exists, to collaboratively develop watershed recommendations that could then be shared with the Grant County Eco-Watershed Planning Group.

Under one of these two recommended options identified, the following additional recommendations could be achieved:

- Ensure that planning group implements activities identified in Potential Partnership Among Planning Group document (Appendix D - Areas of Potential Partnership Among Planning Group Participants)
- Continue to involve both the NMFWR and WNMU in mapping and GIS activities for the planning group
- Identify and implement opportunities to engage Silver City and Pinos Altos citizens in planning group projects
- Further refine Pinos Altos-Silver City Focus Area using watershed boundaries where feasible
- Integrate watershed work of the planning 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
- Have NMFWR continue to engage local businesses and organizations in county-wide watershed-scale restoration projects and continue to build the collaborative capacity of forest and watershed based organizations and governmental organizations

APPENDICES

Appendix A



Appendix C

Potential Partners and Stakeholders By Thematic Area

Emergency Preparedness and Response

Grant County Planning Department
Community Government Representatives
Local Fire Department Representatives
Public Utilities of New Mexico (PNM)
New Mexico Gas Company

Education and Outreach

Silver City Office of Sustainability
Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS)
New Mexico Department of Game and Fish (NMG&F)
Homeowners/Neighborhood Association
Representatives
Grant Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD)
Gila Resources Information Project (GRIP)
Center for Biodiversity (CBD)
Home Owners Insurance Companies (Farmers, State
Farm, Progressive, Geico)
Audobon Society
New Mexico Forest Industry Association (NMFIA)
Wellness Coalition
Mule Deer Foundation Ducks Unlimited
Aldo Leopold Charter School
Public and Charter Schools Within Grant County
Western New Mexico University (WNMU)
The Nature Conservancy (TNC)

On-the-Ground Practices

Stream Dynamics
Upper Gila Watershed Alliance (UGWA)
New Mexico Environmental Department (NMED)
Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS)
Freeport (Mining)
New Mexico Department of Game and Fish (NMG&F)
Grant Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD)
Grant County Cattlegrowers
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS)
Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation
Bureau of Land Management (BLM)
USDA Forest Service
State Forestry
Alternative Forestry
Southwest Solutions
Gila Tree Thinners Trout Unlimited
National Wild Turkey Federation New Mexico Forest
and Watershed Restoration Institute (NMFWRI)

Economic Development

Freeport (Mining)
Grant County Cattlegrowers
Home Owners Insurance Companies (Farmers, State
Farm, Progressive, Geico)
Gila WoodNet
Restoration Technologies
Southwest Solid Waste Authority
New Mexico Department of Transportation
New Mexico Economic Development Department
New Mexico Community Businesses

Appendix D

Areas of Potential Partnership Among Planning Group Participants

Areas of potential support and collaboration identified were:

Silver City

- Meet with Grant County CWPP group to ensure city and county plans are coordinated and consistent
- Fire-Wise assessment training and volunteers to do assessments
- Development of Fire-Wise Federation (would identify what is working and not working in community fire-wise program and develop strategies to increase community involvement)
- Develop fire-wise pamphlet
- Continue involvement of WNMU students in GPS work for fuels treated areas in urban-interface
- Develop sustainability plan based on plan developed in Flagstaff

Grant County

- Meet with Silver City CWPP group to ensure city and county plans are coordinated and consistent
- Work with WNMU, USFS and Silver City to get more volunteer firefighters trained
- Partner with WNMU to establish certificate and associate degree in fire science
- Identify and facilitate opportunities for long-term employment based on fire science study
- Facilitate coordination with USFS and State Forestry of mock fire situations to ensure coordination of organizations and resources during actual fire events
- Lead effort to maintain and update the Community Wildfire Protection Plan and ensure volunteer fire departments and partners are using latest information

USFS – Silver City Ranger District

- Identify opportunities to share and outreach information on latest science through field and local presentations, workshops....
- Have active participation by partners in forest planning input, watershed restoration and on-the-ground implementation projects particularly in extending information to local community members
- Have partners coordinate with fire prevention contact of USFS

The Nature Conservancy

- Collaborate with partners in order to obtain landscape scale project funding