

BLM releases 15-year management strategy, includes Rio Grande

By Matthew van Buren

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The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) recently announced its 15-year management strategy for the National Landscape Conservation System, which includes the Rio Grande in Taos County.

According to information from the BLM, the National Landscape Conservation System includes 27 million acres in 900 units (the BLM manages about 245 million surface acres total).

National Landscape Conservation System areas include national monuments, national conservation areas, wilderness study areas, the national Wild and Scenic Rivers system and other areas, mainly those designated by Congress.

In some National Landscape Conservation System units, the law calls for conservation to be placed above development or production "if a law identifies conservation as the primary use for which the land is designated," according to the strategy. The management strategy promotes conservation while emphasizing collaboration with other entities, public involvement and youth engagement.

New Mexico National Landscape Conservation System Program Lead James Sippel said the R'o Grande, designated in 1968, is the oldest unit managed under the system. He said the BLM's Taos Field Office has been managing the area under the objectives and missions of the National Landscape Conservation System for some time, including restoring habitat and reintroducing species such as the river otter, and working with local communities to expand recreational opportunities.

"We're meeting the strategy objectives," he said.

Sippel said the strategy gives the BLM an opportunity to take a "fresh look" at various areas in the state and examine ways to improve the way they are managed. He said the BLM will be looking at its statewide strategy and bolstering certain objectives over the next year. However, he said because so many resources already go into managing the R'o Grande, Taos County may not see many major changes as a result of the 15-year management strategy.

"It's a pretty major public resource," he said of the Rio Grande.

Sippel said more far-flung units in the state may be given more attention, and changes may be made to them as a result of the strategy.

The management strategy is organized into four themes: ensuring the conservation, protection and restoration of National Landscape Conservation System values; collaboratively managing the system as part of the larger landscape; raising awareness of the value and benefits of the BLM's conservation system; and building upon BLM's commitment to conservation.

According to the strategy, implementation of many ideas depends on available funding, but high-priority action items include providing clear, consistent policy guidance; conducting boundary assessments and working with partners and volunteers to inventory and monitor National Landscape Conservation System areas; limiting negative impacts by those with rights to National Landscape Conservation System lands; engaging tribal, local, state and federal agencies, as well as the public, early in the planning and management process; developing a map that identifies key "habitat linkages" in order to manage National Landscape Conservation System units as parts of the larger ecosystem; conducting public outreach efforts and forming partnerships; and recruiting youth.

Sippel said the BLM aims to draw youth into the management of National Landscape Conservation System areas, as well as bolster partnerships with local communities.

"We actively work with youth groups on things like trail construction and trail maintenance," he said.

He said with the new management strategy, the BLM is looking for additional opportunities to improve and expand on its conservation goals.