

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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**Local Leaders Urge Commission to Support Water Protections for Northern
New Mexico Streams**

*Conserving watersheds will preserve clean water, cultural history, traditional
irrigation, outdoor recreation*

Santa Fe, NM – A diverse coalition, including tribal leaders and governments, community members, local governments, farmers, acequia members, and water conservation groups, are urging the New Mexico Water Quality Control Commission (WQCC) to protect more than 125 miles of six streams - the Rio Grande, Rio Hondo, Lake Fork, East Fork Jemez River, San Antonio Creek, and Redondo Creek - with [Outstanding National Resource Waters \(ONRW\) designations](#).

The WQCC heard public and technical testimony on Tuesday, June 14, and is expected to deliberate and make a decision on the petition at its next meeting on July 12, along with an ONRW nomination for the Upper Pecos Watershed. There were more than 2,200 public comments submitted verbally and in writing representing local ranchers, farmers, acequia parciantes, land grant heirs, Pueblo members, business owners, hunters, anglers, and a wide variety of outdoor recreation enthusiasts.

Outstanding Waters designation for these ecologically and recreationally significant waters would support and protect existing community uses, such as ranching and farming while prohibiting new pollution from impacting these watersheds.

“Since time immemorial and still today, the Rio Jemez and its headwaters are the lifeblood of our people and the ecosystems that are connected to this very special place in our ancestral homelands,” **said Brophy Toledo, Jemez cultural leader and co-founder of Flower Hill Institute**. “We as Native Peoples see the sacredness of the water ecosystems that sustain life for all the birds and animals, plants, and the aquatic life that humans greatly benefit from. These protections will ensure that sacred practices and irrigation can continue without additional requirements while ensuring that new or increased pollution to the watershed is prohibited.”

For centuries, people in northern New Mexico have depended on clean water in the Rio Hondo, Upper Rio Grande, and Jemez watersheds to water livestock and feed acequia systems. The waters in and around the Valles Caldera National Preserve also hold significance for many Pueblos. This designation would ensure that clean water flows downstream to these critical watershed stakeholders and protect these traditional uses from adverse impacts.

“For generations, our ancestors and the acequia community have depended on clean water from these rivers to feed acequia systems, for drinking, and for local food production. In this megadrought era, protecting our rivers is more important than ever,” **said Roberta Salazar, an acequia parciante and Executive Director of Rivers & Birds.** “These Outstanding Water Designations support traditional practices, such as farming and ranching, and will prohibit new pollution from impacting our watersheds and our traditional way of life.”

Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham’s Outdoor Recreation Division filed the [petition](#) with the WQCC, represented by counsel from the Western Environmental Law Center. More than fifty Pueblos, local governments, acequias associations, land grants, schools, neighborhood associations, businesses, and nonprofit organizations [submitted letters of support](#) or passed resolutions supporting the petition, including the All Pueblo Council of Governors and the New Mexico Acequia Commission.

"People from all over the world are drawn to recreate on this beautiful iconic stretch of the Rio Grande and its tributaries," **said Cisco Guevera, owner of Los Rio River Runners, the oldest river rafting company in New Mexico.** "This portion of the Rio Grande was designated as one of our nation's first Wild and Scenic Rivers and is one of the most popular recreational areas in the state of New Mexico. These Outstanding National Resource Water designations benefit present and future generations, reinforce our local tourism economy and honor these extraordinary waters by protecting our water."

The designated waters are rich with ecological resources and provide significant recreational opportunities for both New Mexicans and visitors alike. These waters draw locals and visitors to hike, bike, camp, fish, hunt, raft, kayak, and bird and wildlife watch who, in turn, help support local businesses. New Mexicans and visitors travel to the Rio Grande Gorge and marvel at its 800-foot canyon walls, they hike along the Rio Hondo as they make their way to the state’s highest point Wheeler Peak, and they cast their lines for brown trout in the East Fork of the Jemez, surrounded by the grandeur of the Valles Caldera.

“The streams nominated for outstanding waters protection in Taos County and the Valles Caldera represent some of the best fly fishing in New Mexico,” **said Nick Streit,**

owner of Taos Fly Shop and The Reel Life. “Our fly fishing shops in Taos and Santa Fe probably wouldn’t be in business if we didn’t guide to the Rio Grande and Jemez waters. Keeping these streams clean keeps the fish healthy, and helps keep our business and lots of other outdoor recreation businesses in New Mexico thriving. Giving these waters the highest level of protection is a win for the fish, their habitat, and anglers and recreationists throughout the state.”

In addition, Outstanding Water protections will help draw much-needed attention and funding to restoration and water and fuel management projects throughout these watersheds.

“These areas, cherished for their wild beauty, are threatened by climate change, drought, and increased human activity. All of which increase the potential for degradation to these waters in the short and long term,” **said Rachel Conn, deputy director of Amigos Bravos.** “To protect these waters’ recreational, ecological, cultural, and economic significance, it is imperative that the state act now to preserve and promote their benefits by designating them as ONRWs.”

These designations fit squarely within and further Governor Lujan Grisham’s efforts to diversify the state’s economy and build climate-change resiliency as set forth in [Executive Order 2021-052](#).

Find more information at OurNMWaters.org.

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