Rio Grande Project Drought Resilience Efforts Initiative

NFWF CONTACTS

Kirstin Neff
Program Director,
Southwest
kirstin.neff@nfwf.org
303-222-6485

Emma Wigger
Manager,
Rocky Mountain Regional
Programs
emma.wigger@nfwf.org
202-888-1680

Trevor Davis
Coordinator,
Rocky Mountain Regional
Programs
trevor.davis@nfwf.org
202-595-2442

PARTNERS

- U.S. Bureau of Reclamation
- New Mexico Interstate Stream Commission



Southwestern willow flycatcher

OVERVIEW

The Rio Grande Project Drought Resilience Efforts (DRE) Initiative is dedicated to enhancing water supply and restoring riparian habitat along the Rio Grande in southern New Mexico and the portion of West Texas northwest of El Paso. The Initiative supports multi-benefit projects that help ensure continued access to water for municipal and irrigation use while enhancing habitat and building Rio Grande Project resilience. The DRE Initiative is a partnership between the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) and the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation and the New Mexico Interstate Stream Commission.

The Lower Rio Grande faces mounting pressure from prolonged drought and aridification, reduced surface water availability, and intense monsoon storms that carry floodwater and sediment into the valley while much of that water is lost from the system. Rather than addressing these pressures in isolation, the DRE Initiative invests in projects designed so that a single action strengthens the system on several fronts at once. These projects benefit native riparian birds including the southwestern willow flycatcher and yellow-billed cuckoo, while supporting the municipal water users, irrigators and agricultural producers who depend on Rio Grande Project water supply.

(continued)

ABOUT NFWF

The National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) works with partners to foster sustainable and impactful conservation solutions so that people and nature thrive together. Chartered by Congress in 1984, NFWF has grown to become the nation's largest conservation foundation. Since its founding, NFWF has funded more than 23,900 projects that have generated a total conservation impact of $12 billion.

Learn more at **www.nfwf.org**



Yellow-billed cuckoo

NFWF and partners recently announced a 2026 round of funding for DRE projects. The Initiative awarded nearly $20 million to five new stormwater management, water infrastructure and riparian habitat restoration projects. The five awards leveraged $230,000 in matching contributions from the grantees, providing a total conservation impact of nearly $20.2 million. Implementation partners include local soil and water conservation and irrigation districts and a state university.

GOALS AND OBJECTIVE

The DRE Initiative will:

- Reduce damage from flooding and sedimentation to communities, agricultural lands and river channels, including through nature-based restoration of upper watersheds that slows runoff and traps sediment before it reaches the valley
- Promote aquifer recharge through stormwater management, capturing and infiltrating a portion of stormwater and flood flows to build long-term groundwater resiliency for today and future generations
- Improve infrastructure to manage water, including modernizing irrigation and water delivery systems so that operators can respond to and reduce peak flows during storm events and deliver water more efficiently under drought conditions
- Create and/or sustain habitat and promote watershed health, with an emphasis on restoring bosque and riparian areas that provide high-quality habitat for native riparian birds

DRE investments are targeted primarily to the upper watersheds, arroyos and floodplains within the region where investments are expected to realize the greatest return for both water supply and species. Every funded project advances habitat and watershed health alongside at least one additional goal.

ANTICIPATED OUTCOMES

Collectively, the five DRE Initiative projects are expected to deliver the following outcomes:

- Construct or modify five water infrastructure projects to improve water management
- Create capacity to store more than 47 million gallons of stormwater through water infrastructure improvements
- Implement nature-based restoration practices across more than 900 acres of upper watershed lands to reduce stormwater runoff and sediment flows
- Restore 212 acres of riparian habitat
- Monitor conditions at 78 sites to track project outcomes
- Create 82 jobs directly through project implementation
- Engage 190 volunteers in restoration and monitoring activities

2026 GRANTS

Building Watershed Resilience through Riparian Restoration at Crane's Landing (NM)

Grantee: Doña Ana Soil and Water Conservation District
Grant Amount:..... $948,600
Matching Funds:..... $0
Total Project Amount:..... $948,600

Restore five acres of functional floodplain at Crane's Landing on the Rio Grande to slow, spread and infiltrate stormwater, remove woody invasives and plant riparian and upland zones with native vegetation to create habitat for southwestern willow flycatcher. Project will re-establish natural hydrologic processes, resulting in mitigated local flooding, reduced sediment transport and increased groundwater recharge, and will uplift riparian ecology through targeted restoration.

(continued)



Rio Grande below Elephant Butte

Mesilla Reach Irrigation Infrastructure Improvements for Stormwater and Habitat Management (NM)
Grantee: Elephant Butte Irrigation District
Grant Amount:..... $3,972,600
Matching Funds:..... $0
Total Project Amount:..... $3,972,600
Modernize critical irrigation infrastructure through targeted upgrades and automation improvements while supporting riparian bird habitat along the Mesilla Reach of the Rio Grande in New Mexico. Project will improve operational control, enhancing Elephant Butte Irrigation District's ability to respond to and significantly reduce peak flow during stormwater events, while improving southwestern willow flycatcher and yellow-billed cuckoo habitat.

Process-based Stream Restoration for Drought Resilience on Lower Rio Grande Rangelands (NM)
Grantee: New Mexico State University
Grant Amount:..... $4,288,800
Matching Funds:..... $230,000
Total Project Amount:..... $4,518,800
Implement low-tech process-based restoration strategies including rock check dams, beaver dam analogs and log structures, and precision rangeland management including virtual fencing and native stem planting at Selden Canyon and Ladder Ranch tributaries to the Rio Grande. Project will trap sediment, promote aquifer recharge by raising water tables, increase ground cover at managed grazing sites and restore riparian habitat with native vegetation.

Stormwater Management and Riparian Bird Habitat Restoration at Rincon Arroyo (NM)
Grantee: Elephant Butte Irrigation District
Grant Amount:..... $4,371,600
Matching Funds:..... $0
Total Project Amount:..... $4,371,600
Construct a series of ponding areas, alluvial fan floodplain enhancements and drainage improvements to slow high-velocity arroyo flows and capture stormwater runoff to support the establishment of riparian vegetation and create native bird habitat within the Rincon area of Doña Ana County. Project will result in a significant increase in groundwater recharge and reduction in peak flows during stormwater events and improve southwestern willow flycatcher habitat.

West Mesa Stormwater Capture, Watershed Restoration, and Capacity Building (NM)
Grantee: Doña Ana Soil and Water Conservation District
Grant Amount:..... $6,367,000
Matching Funds:..... $0
Total Project Amount:..... $6,367,000
Implement stormwater management strategies including sediment capture ponds and upper watershed vegetation restoration at Chamberino and nature-based erosion control structures at La Union to establish habitat corridors for southwestern willow flycatcher and other riparian species in the West Mesa. Project will promote stormwater recharge, reduce runoff peak flows and downstream sediment transport, and add stormwater storage to enhance upper watershed stability.