

A Vision: Open Space and Trail System



*For Doña Ana,
New Mexico*

Vision



Interconnected Open Space and Trail System For Doña Ana County

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With input from the Open Space and Trail Network
(see Acknowledgments)

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Overview

Vision for Countywide Open Space and Trail System

This Vision outlines an interconnected open space and trail system for Doña Ana County designed to conserve and enhance the natural and cultural heritage of our region. The Vision both describes the components of the open space and trail system, and provides some implementation recommendations for achieving the Vision.

The structure of the open space and trail system is simple—an array of Core Natural Areas and River Valley Projects, linked together by a network of Connectors. As much as possible, the Vision builds upon existing protected areas, projects that are ongoing, or plans that have already been approved.

Core Areas. The scenic and natural treasures identified as the core areas of the Vision represent the wide diversity of natural habitats and landscapes within Doña Ana County (see Overview Map). The Core Natural Areas contain lands with significant scenic, wildlife, and wilderness values. The desert lands of these Core Natural Areas also provide numerous recreational opportunities and contain sites of cultural and historic significance.

The river valley provides a striking contrast to the surrounding desert. To reflect the diversity of landscapes within Doña Ana County, the Vision highlights several ongoing projects concerned with preserving working farms and restoring wetlands and bosques along the Rio Grande.

Connectors. Links between sites are critical to the creation of a robust open space and trail system. Open space corridors allow for the movement of native plants and wildlife between Core Natural Areas and the river valley, while trail corridors allow people to move between sites and to access them from urban areas.

Core Natural Areas	Core River Valley Projects	Connections
Organ-Franklin Mountains Dona Ana Mountains Potrillo-Aden Volcanic Area Greater Robledo Mountains Area Caballo-Jornada Area West Mesa Escarpment Tortugas mountain Mount. Cristo Rey Regional Open Space Parks	River habitat restoration sites Agricultural buffer along river Town and village buffers	Major Arroyo corridors and trails Irrigation canal and drain trails Rio Grande trail Columbus Highway Scenic Corridor and trail

Overview



Implementation. The Vision is intended as a tool for long-term, regional planning and prioritization. As such, the implementation recommendations are project- or site-specific, and no attempt has been made to develop a single plan for achieving the entire Vision simultaneously. However, to truly achieve connectivity, coordinated planning must underlie all individual projects.

Six Core Natural Areas are on lands already managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), which makes their protection relatively straightforward; the most important step to conserve these areas is simply making sure they are designated for “retention,” not “disposal,” in the BLM’s management plan. Some other projects, such as the Mesilla Valley Bosque Park, already have initial funding in place, which will allow these projects to move forward relatively quickly. For the remainder of the projects, the Vision attempts to lay out some of the necessary steps for their completion.

Underlying all the implementation recommendations is one simple idea: in order to create an interconnected open space and trail system, all jurisdictions need to be working toward the same overall goal—the Vision—in a cooperative and coordinated fashion.

Overview Map



NEW MEXICO

Introduction

Sunny skies 350 days of the year. Spectacular scenery, ranging from rugged desert mountains to a crop-filled river valley. Numerous opportunities for family outings and informal recreation—hiking, biking, and birdwatching, to name a few. The residents of Doña Ana County enjoy a high quality of life, thanks to the rich natural and cultural heritage of our region. This Vision outlines an open space and trail system designed to conserve and enhance that heritage. The Vision both describes the components of the open space and trail system (see Descriptions), and provides some implementation recommendations (see Implementation) for achieving the Vision.

Synergy

The open space and trail system proposed in the Vision is based on the premise of synergy—the value of the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Three elements provide the added value to the system: Diversity, Connectivity, and Cooperation.

Diversity. The lands identified in the Vision represent the wide diversity of landscapes and natural habitats within Doña Ana County, ranging from agricultural lands and river-supported wetlands, to rugged desert mountains and arroyo corridors. The Vision also captures the full diversity of opportunities for informal recreation, ranging from hustle and bustle of urban trail systems to the peace and solitude of roadless wilderness areas.

Connectivity. Links between sites are critical to the creation of a robust open space and trail system. Open space corridors allow for the movement of native plants and animals between Core Natural Areas and the river valley, while trail corridors allow people to move between sites and to access them from urban areas. As explained by the City Parks Forum of the American Planning Association: “The recreational and social values of city parks are well known. However, linking parks, greenways, river corridors, and other natural or restored lands together to create an interconnected green space system provides far greater benefits for people, wildlife, and the economy.”

Cooperation. The concept of synergy also applies to the potential strategies that could be used to protect and manage this system. Numerous stakeholders have a role to play—local governments, state and federal land managers, community groups, environmental organizations, recreational users, private land owners, developers—the list goes on and on. This Vision assumes that a cooperative, coordinated approach to planning and management will enhance the value of the system beyond what could be achieved via a piece-meal approach. This Vision does not call for the condemnation or takings of any privately owned property, but rather envisions collaborating with interested and willing private land-owners.

Goals

This Vision outlines an open space and trail system designed to conserve and enhance the natural and cultural heritage of Doña Ana County. Such a system would provide numerous social, environmental, and economic benefits (economic benefits are summarized in Appendix 1), and would achieve the following goals:

- Promote opportunities for informal outdoor recreation, such as hiking, biking, horseback riding, and wildlife observation.
- Preserve scenic views and opportunities for solitude and quiet nature enjoyment.
- Preserve a natural drainage system throughout county to protect water quality and provide cost-effective flood control.
- Maintain viable populations of native plants and animals by protecting critical habitat and by protecting wildlife movement corridors.
- Preserve in an undeveloped condition unique or significant natural landforms.
- Preserve for public enjoyment and learning significant historical and cultural sites.
- Provide opportunities for non-motorized transportation throughout the county.
- Provide opportunities for stationary and/or higher impact special use outdoor recreation, such as picnicking, fishing, and target shooting.
- Preserve farmland for agricultural and environmental uses.
- Complement urban growth planning and attract investment.

Each Core Natural Area, Core River Valley Project, and Connector in the Vision can help to achieve more than one of these goals, just as each goal will require the conservation of more than one core area or connector. The particular resource values of each core area and connector are explained in the Descriptions which follows, while a partial list of sites and projects that could help achieve each goal is contained in Appendix 2.

Description of Components of Open Space and Trail System

The structure of the proposed open space and trail system is simple—an array of Core Natural Areas and River Valley Projects, linked together by a network of Connectors. As much as possible, the Vision builds upon existing protected areas (such as the Organ Mountains Area of Critical Environmental Concern), projects that are ongoing (such as planning efforts for Tortugas Mountain), or plans that have been approved (such as the Metropolitan Planning Organization’s Trail Plan). The Vision simply gathers all these together, and notes where they could be expanded to provide additional connectors or to better conserve the core areas. Detailed maps are presented in Appendix 3.

Core Natural Areas

These are all large, contiguous blocks of relatively pristine land, with exceptional scenic, wildlife, and wilderness values. These are the landmarks of Doña Ana County—their silhouettes define our skyline. The desert lands of these Core Natural Areas also provide numerous recreational opportunities and contain sites of cultural and historic significance.

Organ-Franklin Mountains. The centerpiece of the Vision, these majestic peaks east of Las Cruces are Doña Ana County’s most recognizable landmark, and they are home to several plants and animals found nowhere else on earth. Military lands to the east and north preclude public access, but provide important protection for many of these sensitive native species; in addition, north of Highway 70, the military lands protect a critical wildlife movement corridor between the Organ Mountains and the San Andres National Wildlife Refuge (home to the New Mexico’s largest herd of Desert Bighorn Sheep, which are listed as endangered by the state of New Mexico). Fortunately, large areas of the Organ and Franklin Mountains are already protected by special management designations (Areas of Critical Environmental Concern and Wilderness Study Areas) from the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). The boundaries proposed in the Vision include these areas already designated for special management by the BLM, with a few extensions. Between the town of Organ and the Talavera area, the BLM’s Area of Critical Environmental Concern currently protects an important buffer along the base of the Organs, protecting an area that extends west of Baylor Canyon Road. The Vision proposes extending those special management designations from the base of the mountains to the north and south, including protection for the San Andres Mountain foothills to the north and the Organ Mountains south of Talavera.

Doña Ana Mountains. This isolated cluster of peaks north of Highway 70 is a popular recreational destination, as well as the site of numerous educational and research initiatives. The Doña Ana Mountains are adjacent to both New Mexico State University’s Chihuahuan Desert Rangeland Research Center and the United States Department of Agriculture’s Jornada Experimental Range, which provide wildlife with extensive, valuable connections to the San

Description of Components of Open Space and Trail System

Andres Mountains to the east and the Rio Grande to the west. The Doña Anas are partially protected by existing BLM designations, as well as the New Mexico State University Chihuahuan Desert Rangeland Research Center and the Chihuahuan Desert Nature Park. The boundaries of the Core Natural Area in the Vision extend farther along the eastern and southern slopes of the mountains, to help buffer the nature park and to protect portions of the extensive natural drainage system which feeds into Isaack Lake, a large playa that provides valuable wildlife habitat.

Greater Robledo Mountains Area. BLM designations already protect the heart of the Robledo Mountains and Sierra de Las Uvas. The boundaries of this Core Natural Area link these two ranges together along with Picacho Peak, numerous smaller mountains, portions of the Uvas Valley, a badland area west of Hatch, and a portion of the historic Butterfield Trail. This boundary encompasses a wide sweep of lands west of the river with significant wilderness, wildlife, and cultural values, as well as the canyons and arroyos that lead into the area. A potential wildlife movement corridor between the Doña Ana Mountains and the Robledo Mountains exists north of Radium Springs, where the Chihuahuan Desert Rangeland Research Center abuts the river on the east side. To reinforce this connectivity across the river through Selden Canyon, the boundaries of this Core Natural Area include two small areas on the east side of the river: Tonuco Mountain (an important landmark overlooking the northern end of Selden Canyon), and Selden Hills (the bluffs overlooking the southern end of Selden Canyon and Leasburg Dam State Park).

Potrillo-Aden Volcanic Area. The southwestern corner of the county contains a fascinating landscape highlighted by lava flows and volcanic craters. Significant isolated volcanic features are already protected by special designations from the BLM, including the Kilbourne Hole National Natural Landmark, the Aden Lava Flow Research Natural Area, and the West Potrillo Mountains Wilderness Study Area. The Vision links all these features together in a Core Natural Area to protect the geology and wilderness values of this unique corner of the county.

Caballo-Jornada Area. Extending into Sierra County, a portion of the Caballo Mountains is already protected by an existing BLM designation. This Core Natural Area will conserve the wilderness, cultural, and scenic values of the Caballo Mountains and Point of Rocks. In addition, the boundaries of this Core Natural Area include the area labeled as “Jornada Basin” on the Vision maps. The Jornada Basin contains gypsum lakes, a unique geological feature, and it also represents a potential wildlife movement corridor between the San Andres Mountains and the Caballos. Protecting a wildlife corridor across the Jornada Basin is particularly important now that plans for developing a space port on the east side of the Caballo Mountains are gaining momentum.

Description of Components of Open Space and Trail System

West Mesa Escarpment. This ribbon of steep, highly erodable land represents the distinct boundary between the Rio Grande valley and the uplands of the west mesa. As the scenic rest area along Interstate 10 illustrates, the views from the top of the West Mesa escarpment are phenomenal, looking over the river valley and across to the Organ Mountains. In addition, the escarpment is an important scenic resource for people in the valley and on the East Mesa; because of the topography, when you look to the west from the valley or East Mesa, most of what you see is the escarpment, with a backdrop of mountain peaks sticking up in the distance. The proposed boundaries of this Core Natural Area protect that scenic resource, as well as unstable slopes and numerous archaeological sites. In addition, a few adjacent areas along the eastern edge of the west mesa—the proposed West Mesa Regional Park, the upland portions of the Mesilla Valley Bosque Park, and Black Mountain (a striking volcanic feature)—are included within the escarpment area boundaries so they will remain connected to the escarpment and, therefore, connected to the river valley below.

Tortugas Mountain. This Las Cruces landmark (sometimes referred to as “A” Mountain) is a significant cultural resource as well as a popular recreational destination for the entire region. The county has already designated an advisory committee charged with developing a plan for the Tortugas Mountain area. The boundaries proposed in this Vision are tentative, pending the outcome of that planning process for the NMSU and NASA land outlined on the Vision maps. In addition, the Vision includes a wildlife and recreational corridor on BLM lands to the east to ensure that Tortugas Mountain remains connected to the Organ Mountains.

Mount Cristo Rey. Like Tortugas Mountain, this landmark at the southern tip of Doña Ana County is a significant cultural resource, and unique dinosaur trackway fossils were recently discovered at the site. Although the scope of this Vision is limited to Doña Ana County, this peak actually contains lands within three states, and two nations. On the US side of the border, preliminary management plans are being developed through public-private partnerships involving private landowners, scientific experts, and educational institutions.

Regional Open Space Parks. The City of Las Cruces has initiated preliminary planning for a variety of large sites within its jurisdiction, many of which are brownfields, old landfills, or storm water facilities. Sites where such planning processes are underway or have been discussed include Burn Lake, the Lohman extension open space, the Foothills Landfill, the Oro Vista Ponding area, and the Villa Mora ponding area. Two additional regional parks are included elsewhere in the Vision. Because of its direct connection to several major arroyos, the recreational plan developed for the Las Cruces Dam is included with the Major Arroyo Corridors and Trails in this Vision; similarly, the West Mesa Regional Park is included with the West Mesa Escarpment.

Description of Components of Open Space and Trail System

This Vision includes such sites as valuable regional resources deserving of restoration and enhancement. Some of these sites may end up as mixed use areas, containing both active recreation amenities as well as areas where natural habitats have been protected or restored. As elements of a regional open space and trail system, it is critical that connectors between these sites and other open spaces be planned for and provided, to allow for both trail connectors and movement corridors for native plants and animals. Over time, additional sites may be added to this category, both in the City and Doña Ana County.

Core River Valley Projects

The agricultural lands of the river valley provide a scenic backdrop valued by many, as well as a physical reminder of our region's history and culture. Agricultural production is also an important part of our region's economy, and the natural habitats supported by the waters of the Rio Grande are home to many native species. Several proposed and ongoing projects aim to conserve some of these valley lands.

River Habitat Restoration. Numerous projects and proposals exist for the restoration of wetlands, bosques, and aquatic habitats along the river. Many of these projects are the result of public-private partnerships or intergovernmental cooperation.

- The City of Las Cruces and Southwest Environmental Center led a cooperative effort to create the Picacho Wetlands west of the river near Mesilla.
- The Picacho Wetlands are within the boundaries of the fledgling Mesilla Valley Bosque State Park, which has received funding for the first phases of planning and development.
- Within a few miles of the park, the City of Las Cruces and the Army Corps of Engineers have completed preliminary studies for the creation of the Alamo Drain Wetlands.
- The Southwest Environmental Center is fund-raising to buy a 15-acre tract of land along the river north of Highway 70 with both water rights and remnant bosque habitat.
- The United States Section, International Boundary and Water Commission is completing an environmental impact statement for its management of the Rio Grande through Doña Ana County, which may identify sites suitable for habitat mitigation measures.
- The City of Las Cruces' Rio Grande Riparian Ecological Corridor Project Comprehensive Plan also identifies potential sites for habitat restoration along an 11-mile reach of the river.

Description of Components of Open Space and Trail System

Over time, as these projects are implemented and more experience with restoration strategies is gained, additional projects may be proposed which could be added to this list.

Agricultural Buffers. While preservation of working farms anywhere in the river valley could provide economic, social, scenic, and environmental benefits, the Vision highlights a few ongoing projects that are targeting particular areas to maximize the potential environmental benefits and to complement growth management efforts.

- In order to protect and enhance the natural habitats being restored along the river and to provide a rural transition between the river and urbanized areas, the Rio Grande Riparian Ecological Corridor Project Comprehensive Plan calls for the preservation of an agricultural buffer along the river.
- The Town of Mesilla has long worked to preserve its identity and historic character by protecting agricultural lands around the town center through zoning. The Town also recently modified its cluster development ordinance hoping to increase its use as a tool in this effort. The Town's new comprehensive plan outlines several potential tools for the preservation of agricultural lands; preliminary steps toward a conservation easement ordinance have already been taken.
- Doña Ana County has begun working with the smaller communities in the county on Village District and Community District zoning projects to help the communities protect their identities and manage growth patterns. The project has been completed in La Union, and is underway in Vado.
- Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA) is an agricultural model in which members buy shares in a local agricultural operation and receive a portion of the farm's produce in return. The OASIS (Organic Agriculture Students Inspiring Sustainability) program at NMSU is a CSA program that also provides students with a hands-on educational experience and many research opportunities. The OASIS program is also partnering with the Community Action Agency, the Community of Hope, and the City of Las Cruces to seek federal funding for urban vegetable gardens that could grow produce for social service agencies and provide employment opportunities.
- The New Mexico Land Conservancy is a statewide land trust that can facilitate the voluntary preservation of working farms and ranches by accepting and monitoring donated conservation easements. This non-profit organization is in conversation with some Mesilla Valley farmers who are considering such voluntary measures.

Description of Components of Open Space and Trail System

Connectors

Major Arroyos and Dams. Extending from the mountains to the river valley, the major arroyos provide a valuable natural connection for storm-water runoff and wildlife, as well as numerous opportunities for recreation. Various planning documents (including the City of Las Cruces Comprehensive Plan and the Extraterritorial Zone Comprehensive Plan) call for the preservation of major arroyo corridors as natural open space and trail corridors. The City's Storm Water Management Policy Plan (page 21) identifies the following arroyos as suitable for open space corridors: "Fillmore Arroyo, Telbrook Arroyo, segments of the Little Dam Arroyo, and North and South Fork Las Cruces Arroyo, Alameda Arroyo, a segment of the Sandhill Arroyo and unnamed major arroyos as identified on the Major Arroyo Corridor Identification Map." The Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) has already adopted a conceptual trail plan which identifies several major arroyos in the Las Cruces area as potential trail corridors (shown on the Las Cruces Area Detail map, Appendix 3).

This Vision proposes layering the MPO trail plan on top of policies which would protect a natural open space corridor along major arroyos (both in the City and County), as well as extending the trail plan to arroyos in areas beyond the jurisdiction of the MPO. Retention dams (such as the Las Cruces Flood Control Dam) and other storm water management areas along arroyos are also significant resources where proper management could enhance wildlife and open space values.

Irrigation Canal and Drain Trails. The MPO trail plan also includes an interconnected system of trails along irrigation canals and drains within the river valley. Elephant Butte Irrigation District is supportive of the concept of such a trail system, and is working with state legislators and others to resolve a liability issue brought about by an opinion from the State Attorney General. Once that issue is resolved, the City of Las Cruces is ready to move forward with joint-use agreements that should allow for the development of initial phases of the trail plan. As implementation of the MPO trail plan moves forward, the County and EBID should extend the trail plan into areas beyond the jurisdiction of the MPO, to provide similar connectors for residents in other parts of the river valley. In addition to extending the trail plans within the valley, connectivity between the river valley trail system and trails along arroyos to provide connectors to Core Natural Areas should be planned for and provided.

River Trail. The MPO trail plan connects the canal and drain trails to a trail along the Rio Grande, and the Rio Grande Riparian Ecological Corridor Project Comprehensive Plan calls for trails along an 11-mile reach of the river from the Mesilla Dam to Shalem Colony Road. The City of Las Cruces has already constructed over 4 miles of trail extending from the Calle del Norte Bridge to the end of the Las Cruces Dam Outfall Channel (1.1 miles north of Highway 70), and

Description of Components of Open Space and Trail System

planners in the County and the Town of Mesilla are exploring funding opportunities to pay for an extension of that trail. The City of Sunland Park has funding in place to build 5 miles of trail along the river in southernmost Doña Ana County, and discussions are underway to ensure that the Sunland Park trail is connected to almost 12 miles of trail being developed along the river in El Paso County. Over time, such an incremental approach could lead to a continuous trail along the river throughout Doña Ana County.

Columbus Highway Scenic Corridor. Traversing BLM lands west of Santa Teresa, this rural highway provides beautiful scenery and is currently free from any significant roadside development or billboards. It is also the gateway to the Potrillo-Aden Volcanic Area.

A scenic byway designation and management plan for BLM lands within the proposed boundaries could help protect this area. The corridor also contains a segment of an abandoned railroad right-of-way, running all the way from El Paso to Hachita (in Grants County), which could be capitalized upon as a rails-to-trails project. The Rails-to-Trails Conservancy (www.railtrails.org) is a nationwide organization that helps communities develop abandoned railroad right-of-ways into trail systems.

Implementation

The Vision is intended as a tool for long-term, regional planning and prioritization. As such, the implementation recommendations are project- or site-specific, and no attempt has been made to develop a single plan for achieving the entire Vision simultaneously. However, to truly achieve connectivity, coordinated planning must underlie all individual projects, including regional cooperation on prioritizing individual projects and trail segments for development.

Underlying all the implementation recommendations that follow is one simple idea: in order to create an interconnected open space and trail system, all jurisdictions need to be working toward the same overall goal—the Vision—in a cooperative and coordinated fashion.

Core Natural Areas

Many of the Core Natural Areas contain lands currently managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), and the Vision proposes that they would remain under BLM management. Because the management of these lands is already within the BLM’s mission, their conservation should not require the development of any new sources of funding. The recommendations below identify what jurisdiction has the primary responsibility for action; in some instances, community-wide involvement is recommended.

Organ-Franklin Mountains.

- BLM: Maintain all existing special management designations within this area.
- BLM: Remove the “disposal” designation from all BLM land within the area labeled as “Expanded Organ Mts. Recreation Area” on the Las Cruces Area Detail map.
- BLM: Remove the “disposal” designation from all BLM land within the area labeled “San Andres Foothills” on the Vision maps.
- BLM: Work with the State Land Office to develop land exchanges that would allow BLM to acquire State Trust Lands within the “Expanded Organ Mts. Recreation Area” and “San Andres Foothills” on the Vision maps.
- BLM: Develop management guidelines to protect the scenic, wildlife, cultural, and wilderness values within this Core Natural Area.

Doña Ana Mountains.

- BLM: Maintain all existing special management designations within this area.
- BLM: Work with willing sellers to acquire (via BLM purchase or exchange) private lands within this Core Natural Area. Or, alternatively, support private partnerships that could facilitate the donation of conservation easements for private land within the boundaries.
- BLM: Work with the State Land Office to develop land exchanges that would allow BLM to acquire State Trust Lands within the boundaries of this Core Natural Area.

Implementation

- BLM: Develop management guidelines to protect the scenic, wildlife, and educational values of this Core Natural Area.

Greater Robledo Mountains Area.

- BLM: Maintain all existing special management designations within this area.
- BLM: At a minimum, complete road and trail designations for special management areas (WSA's, ACEC's etc.) within this Core Natural Area; if possible, extend travel management plans into other sections of this Core Natural Area. A number of interested parties are developing a proposed transportation plan for this area that will be submitted as a part of the Mimbres Resource Management Plan revision.
- BLM: Develop management guidelines to protect the scenic, wildlife, cultural, and wilderness values of this Core Natural Area.
- Entire Community: Support private partnerships that could facilitate the donation of conservation easements for private land within the boundaries.

Potrillo-Aden Volcanic Area.

- BLM: Maintain all existing special management designations within this area.
- BLM: At a minimum, complete road and trail designations for special management areas (WSA's, ACEC's etc.) within this Core Natural Area; if possible, extend travel management plans into other sections of this Core Natural Area. A number of interested parties are developing a proposed transportation plan for this area that will be submitted as a part of the Mimbres Resource Management Plan revision.
- BLM: Develop management guidelines to protect the scenic, wildlife, cultural, wilderness, and research values of this Core Natural Area.
- Entire Community: Support private partnerships that could facilitate the donation of conservation easements for private land within the boundaries.

Caballo-Jornada Area.

- BLM: Maintain all existing special management designations within this area.
- BLM: At a minimum, complete road and trail designations for special management areas (WSA's, ACEC's etc.) within this Core Natural Area; if possible, extend travel management plans into other sections of this Core Natural Area. A number of interested parties are developing a proposed transportation plan for this area that will be submitted as a part of the Mimbres Resource Management Plan revision.
- BLM: Develop management guidelines to protect the scenic, wildlife, cultural, and wilderness values of this Core Natural Area.
- Entire Community: Support private partnerships that could facilitate the donation of conservation easements for private land within the boundaries.

Implementation

West Mesa Escarpment.

- BLM: Remove disposal designation from BLM lands within area boundaries.
- NM State Parks: Include escarpment and top of west mesa in plans for Mesilla Valley Bosque State Park.
- City of Las Cruces/Doña Ana County/BLM: Revisit plan for West Mesa Regional Park.

Tortugas Mountain.

- Entire Community: Pursue development of core recreational/cultural site currently being planned by the advisory committee created by the county.
- BLM: Remove disposal designation from BLM lands within the Tortugas Corridor on the Vision maps, or other lands as recommended by the advisory committee.

Mount Cristo Rey.

- Interested Stakeholders: Continue cooperative planning efforts underway involving private land owners, researchers, and educational experts.

Regional Open Space Parks.

- City of Las Cruces: Pursue planning and development of these sites, with an emphasis on maximizing the value of any natural vegetation and wildlife habitat within the sites. Ensure that active recreation amenities are compatible with natural habitats being protected within these parks.
- City of Las Cruces: Ensure connectivity between regional parks and other open space areas in the Vision to provide movement corridors for native plants and animals, and well as trail access for recreational users.

Core River Valley Projects

Because these are largely ongoing and proposed projects, implementation efforts are already underway for many of these projects. Instead of presenting recommendations for particular jurisdictions, this section summarizes the status of ongoing efforts.

River Habitat Restoration. All efforts to restore natural habitats along the Rio Grande face numerous challenges due to the complex politics of water. The specific projects described below will necessarily be influenced by regional water planning and management efforts, as well as flood control and interstate and international treaty obligations. As these projects move forward, creative solutions to flood control, the acquisition and transfer of water rights, and the reallocation of existing water supplies may have an immense impact on future restoration efforts.

Implementation

- State funding for initial planning, development, and staffing of the Mesilla Valley Bosque State Park is already in place. The Trust for Public Lands is helping the state with the acquisition of land and conservation easements. Local community organizations, including the Southwest Environmental Center and Mesilla Valley Audubon Society, are committed to supporting the park with volunteers and community outreach programs.
- Development of the Alamo Drain Wetlands will depend upon a federal-local match of funds.
- The Southwest Environmental Center is trying to raise both public and private funds to purchase and manage 15 acres of land along the river.
- Completion of the Environmental Impact Statement by the United States Section, International Boundary and Water Commission may result in federal funds for habitat mitigation along the river.
- The Rio Grande Riparian Ecological Corridor Project Comprehensive Plan identifies and prioritizes several sites for potential wetland restoration projects and makes recommendations about how to improve habitats along the river. Implementation of the plan will require multi-jurisdictional cooperation and development of funding sources.

Agricultural Buffers. Development pressure, economic trends that affect farm profits, and increasing demand for surface water for non-agricultural uses all threaten the agricultural legacy of the Mesilla Valley. The projects described below are merely a starting point for preserving working farms in our region.

- The Rio Grande Riparian Ecological Corridor Project Comprehensive Plan makes a number of recommendations about how to preserve an agricultural buffer along the river. Implementation of the plan will require multi-jurisdictional cooperation and the development of funding sources. Cooperation with a private land trust, such as the New Mexico Land Conservancy, will also be critical in these efforts.
- Future efforts in the Town of Mesilla will likely be driven by the new comprehensive plan. First steps might include the completion of an agricultural preservation study and the creation of an agricultural preservation committee, as well as ongoing regional planning initiatives.
- Doña Ana County is prioritizing Village and Community District Zoning on communities where the installation of new sewage systems has increased development pressures. This process will be a long-term, ongoing effort.
- The expansion of Community-Supported Agriculture programs could be facilitated by additional communication between the agricultural community, NMSU, and local governments. In addition, coordinated planning efforts involving local governments

Implementation

and social service agencies could help to identify landowners who might be interested in contributing land and water to create gardens for local hunger initiatives.

- As the above efforts move forward, information sharing between all entities involved in agricultural preservation could allow them to develop additional tools and resources for such projects. In addition, as these tools and resources are developed, their use could be extended into other parts of the river valley.

Connectors

Intergovernmental cooperation will be critical to the preservation and development of most of these connectors, because they cross jurisdictional boundaries. The recommendations below identify what jurisdiction has the primary responsibility for action; in some instances, community-wide involvement is recommended.

Major Arroyo Corridors. Because the arroyo corridors cross jurisdictional boundaries, it will require cooperation between the private sector and various governmental agencies to protect and manage these sites. Intense development pressure on the East Mesa of Las Cruces makes this a critical time for the City to move forward with the preservation of arroyos called for in its comprehensive plan.

- City of Las Cruces: Use adopted master plans that include protected open space and trail corridors along arroyos (ie: Mission Hills, Alameda Preserve, Alameda Ranch, and Pueblo de las Alamedas) as demonstration projects for future development proposals as well as public funding initiatives.
- City of Las Cruces: Pursue East Mesa watershed management study with the Army Corps of Engineers to identify natural and cultural resources along major arroyos, and implement the Corps' recreation plan for the Las Cruces Dam.
- City of Las Cruces: Develop Major Arroyo Plan and related policies, design standards, and developer incentives as described in the Strategic Plan, Comprehensive Plan, and Storm Water Management Policy Plan.
- City of Las Cruces/Doña Ana County: Work with State Land Office and BLM to acquire major arroyo corridors prior to release of public lands.
- City of Las Cruces/Doña Ana County: Work with Trust for Public Lands to develop funding strategy for acquisition and maintenance of arroyo corridors.
- Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO): Extend arroyo trails included in the MPO trail plan to reach all the way to protected BLM lands at base of mountains.
- City of Las Cruces/Doña Ana County: Cooperate on arroyo planning and preservation for any major arroyo that crosses jurisdictional boundaries.

Implementation

- Doña Ana County: Beyond the boundaries of the ETZ, identify major arroyos suitable for open space and trail corridors.
- Doña Ana County: Develop necessary land-use plans, policies, design standards, and incentives to work with developers on proposals affecting major arroyo corridors.

Irrigation Canal and Drain Trails.

- Entire Community: Support Elephant Butte Irrigation District efforts to find workable solution to liability issue.
- MPO: Prioritize sequence of trail development.
- MPO: Facilitate adoption of joint-use agreements between EBID and City of Las Cruces, Town of Mesilla, and Doña Ana County.
- City/Town/County: Pursue funding for trail development and maintenance.
- Doña Ana County/EBID: Extend trail plan into portions of river valley outside of the jurisdiction of the MPO.

River Trail.

- City of Las Cruces: Monitor the durability of the permeable surface used to construct the trail north of Highway 70, and share results with other jurisdictions developing trails along the river and arroyos.
- City of Las Cruces/Town of Mesilla/Doña Ana County: Implement recommendations of the Rio Grande Riparian Ecological Corridor Project Comprehensive Plan relating to river trail (Goal 3).
- City of Las Cruces/Town of Mesilla/Doña Ana County/Sunland Park: Cooperate in both prioritizing trail segments for development and pursuit of funding.

Columbus Highway Scenic Corridor.

- BLM: designate corridor as a Back Country Byway and develop management guidelines to protect scenic values of the corridor.
- Sunland Park/Doña Ana County: Work with the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy on trail project for El Paso to Hachita railroad corridor.

Conclusion

This Vision outlines an open space and trail system designed to conserve and enhance the natural and cultural heritage of Doña Ana County. It also provides preliminary recommendations for protecting core areas and pursuing individual projects within the Vision. The Vision is intended to be used as an open space and trail infrastructure overlay in land-use planning throughout our region, to help decision-makers consider regional issues when looking at site-specific proposals. The Vision also provides a starting point for community-wide conversations about how to prioritize the various projects described and how to fund their development and long-term management. In addition to the recommendations offered for each particular project, the following general recommendations apply to any and all efforts in this region:

- Support the Open Space and Trail Network as a regional organization to facilitate communication among stakeholders, prioritization, and strategy development.
- Encourage all user groups, including neighborhood associations and community organizations, to participate in the development and stewardship of particular projects.
- Explore the creation of a Regional Open Space and Trail Authority for projects that cross jurisdictional boundaries.
- Create regional development and conservation guidelines for resources that cross jurisdictional boundaries, such as an Arroyo Protection Plan, a Hillside and Escarpment Protection Plan, a Wildlife Conservation Plan, and a Farmland Conservation Plan.
- Ask for assistance from organizations whose mission includes assisting communities in protecting open space and trail systems, such as the Trust for Public Lands, the National Park Service Rivers and Trails Conservation Assistance Program, 1000 Friends of New Mexico, the Sonoran Institute, the Nature Conservancy, the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, the New Mexico Land Conservancy, the Land Trust Alliance, the American Farmland Trust, and many, many more.
- Update the Vision regularly, to accommodate changes in our community and new ideas about the proposed open space and trail system.

Acknowledgments

The creation of this Vision would not have been possible without the generous assistance of the National Park Service Rivers and Trails Conservation Assistance Program and Paul Cusumano, our NPS-RTCA advisor. We would also like to thank the numerous organizations participating in the Open Space and Trail Network whose input and technical assistance helped us draft this Vision. Listing their names here does not imply that any of these organizations endorse the specific content of this Vision. Network Participants: Bureau of Land Management (Las Cruces Field Office), New Mexico State Land Office (Las Cruces District), Doña Ana County (Community Development, Strategic Planning Committee), City of Las Cruces (Community Development, Parks), Las Cruces Metropolitan Planning Organization, Town of Mesilla, New Mexico State University (Real Estate), Natural Resources Conservation Service (Las Cruces Field Office)—La Union Soil and Water Conservation District, Chihuahuan Desert Nature Park, Elephant Butte Irrigation District, Las Cruces Home Builders Association, League of Women Voters of Greater Las Cruces, Lower Rio Grande Back Country Horsemen, Mesilla Valley Track Club, The Nature Conservancy of New Mexico, New Mexico Wilderness Alliance, Southwest Environmental Center, World Wildlife Fund Chihuahuan Desert Program, and Zia Carriage Drivers.

Appendix 1: Economic Benefits of Open Space and Trails

Reproduced from the Trust for Public Lands, *Land and People* magazine, Fall 2004, page 57.

“It pays to save!

Six reasons why land conservation makes good economic sense.

1. Parks and open space often increase the value of nearby properties, along with property tax revenue.
2. Parks and open space attract businesses and trained employees in search of a high quality of life.
3. Parks and open space attract tourists and boost recreation spending.
4. Parks and open space reduce obesity and health care costs by supporting exercise and recreation.
5. Working lands, such as farms and forests, usually contribute more money to a community than the cost of the services they require.
6. Conserved open space helps safeguard drinking water, clean the air, and prevent flooding—services provided much more expensively by other means.

Web Cite: For more information on the economic benefits of parks and open space, go to www.tpl.org/benefits.”

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Appendix 2: Rationale

Proposed Rationale for the Open Space and Trail System for Dona Ana County

This rationale combines many different goals and related activities that benefit the public by providing numerous social, environmental, and economic benefits and helping to preserve our natural resources. This approach can be called “multiuse.”

1. Goal: Promote opportunities for informal outdoor recreation.
 - a. Emphasis: recreation, movement, people having fun.
 - b. Activities: hiking, walking, running, mountain biking, horseback riding, bird watching, wildlife observation.
 - c. Components: regional parks, ditch banks, arroyo trails, undeveloped river corridor, utility corridors, railroad ROWs.
 - d. Examples: Mesilla Valley Bosque Park, MPO Proposed Trail System, Las Cruces Dam, proposed West Mesa Regional Park, Dona Ana Mountains, Sierra Vista Trail, Chihuahuan Desert Nature Park.
2. Goal: Provide scenic views and opportunities for solitude and quiet nature enjoyment.
 - a. Emphasis: nature, quiet, interaction of people with nature.
 - b. Activities: hiking, walking, nature education, birdwatching, wildlife observation, research.
 - c. Components: wilderness/roadless areas, regional parks, undeveloped river corridor, arroyos.
 - d. Examples: Mountain Core Areas, Mesilla Valley Bosque State Park, Chihuahuan Desert Nature Park, NMSU Chihuahuan Desert Rangeland Research Center
3. Goal: Preserve a natural drainage system throughout county.
 - a. Emphasis: natural flood control, unpaved drainage system, groundwater recharge, maintenance of surface and groundwater water quality.
 - b. Activities: hiking, walking, bird watching, horseback riding, etc. (i.e. almost anything that does not require pavement and does not cause undue erosion/pollution.).
 - c. Components: arroyos, river.
 - d. Examples: MPO Proposed Trail System, proposed West Mesa Regional Park.

Appendix 2: Rationale

4. Goal: Maintain populations in the County of native plants and animals that are viable over the long term, and help to maintain viable populations in the region by providing connected corridors that allow movement of animals through the county.
 - a. Emphasis: preservation of biological diversity, wildlife and plant conservation, nature reserves, corridors, connectivity.
 - b. Activities: wildlife viewing, research, hiking, walking, bird watching.
 - c. Components: wilderness/roadless areas, regional parks, undeveloped river corridor, arroyos, irrigation drains.
 - d. Examples: Mountain Core Areas, MPO Proposed Trail System, Selden Canyon, Placitas Arroyo, burrowing owl nest sites, Mesilla Valley Bosque State Park.
5. Goal: Preserve in an undeveloped condition unique or significant natural landforms.
 - a. Emphasis: geological/topographical uniqueness, education/interpretation, tourism, destinations.
 - b. Activities: hiking, walking, nature observation, field trips, research, religious pilgrimages.
 - c. Components: mountains/peaks, unique landforms
 - d. Examples: Organs, Doña Anas, Robledos, Potrillos, Tonuco, Tortugas, Picacho, Cristo Rey, Bishops Cap, Pena Blanca, Franklins; west mesa escarpment; Aden lava flow, Box Canyon, Kilbourne Hole, Geronimo Cave.
6. Goal: Preserve for public enjoyment and learning significant historical and cultural sites.
 - a. Emphasis: cultural and historical significance, education/interpretation, tourism, destinations.
 - b. Activities: hiking, walking, nature observation, field trips, research, religious pilgrimages.
 - c. Components: rock art, historic sites, archaeological sites.
 - d. Examples: Fort Selden State Monument, Pat Garrett murder site, petroglyph sites, Los Tules Pit House site, Mexican Land Grants, Mesilla Phase Jornada Mogollon Pit House Culture, Robledo trackways, Mount Cristo Rey, Tortugas Mountain.
7. Goal: Provide opportunities for non-motorized transportation throughout the county.
 - a. Emphasis: alternative transportation, fast movement, convenience, exercise.
 - b. Activities: road biking, mountain biking, bicycle racing.

Appendix 2: Rationale

- c. Components: bicycle lanes, bicycle paths, multi-use paths with appropriate surfaces, farm/rural roads
 - d. Examples: MPO Bicycle Facilities Plan; La Llorona path; Triviz path; roads such as Shalem Colony, Fairacres, Snow, Calle del Norte, Highway 28, Dripping Springs Road.
- 8. Goal: Provide opportunities for stationary and/or higher impact special use outdoor recreation.
 - a. Emphasis: family/group activities, longer use periods, concentrated use, special needs.
 - b. Activities: picnicking, camping, fishing, boating, dog exercise, target shooting, hunting, rock collecting, outdoor concerts, etc. (the list of potential special uses that could be accommodated is lengthy).
 - c. Components: designated areas at specific sites.
 - d. Examples: Burn Lake, river corridor, old quarries.
- 9. Goal: Preserve farmland for agricultural and environmental uses.
 - a. Emphasis: scenic views, local market farming, specialty farming and farming for wildlife, groundwater recharge, cultural heritage.
 - b. Activities: fruit/vegetable stands, local markets, education, scenic drives and bicycle routes.
 - c. Components: existing farmland, rural villages.
 - d. Examples: agricultural buffer for Town of Mesilla, Highway 28 scenic route, agricultural buffer for river corridor, village and community district zoning (VRAG and CRAG).
- 10. Goal: Complement urban growth planning and attract investment.
 - a. Emphasis: thoughtful, planned growth.
 - b. Activities: create voluntary and regulatory measures promoting open space planning as infrastructure.
 - c. Components: open space and trail planning within and as buffers to development.
 - d. Examples: urban and residential development that includes open space and trails such as the Mission Hills Master Plan for the N. Fork of the Las Cruces Arroyo; and the Alameda Preserve, Alameda Ranch, and Pueblo de las Alamedas master plans along the Alameda Arroyo.

Appendix 3: Detailed Maps

[County-wide Detail map]

Appendix 3: Detailed Maps

[Las Cruces Area Detail map]

Appendix 4: Inventory

Elements Included within Proposed Open Space and Trail Areas

These lists identify existing designations and some of the specific sites included within the Proposed Open Space and Trail Areas. A (p) after an element indicates that it is a proposal from a community group or other organization that has not been officially adopted by any governmental jurisdiction.

Abbreviations

ACE: Army Corps of Engineers
ACEC: Area of Critical Environmental Concern, BLM
BLM: Bureau of Land Management
CTF: Citizen's Task Force for Open Space Preservation
MPO: Metropolitan Planning Organization
NMSU: New Mexico State University
NMWA: New Mexico Wilderness Alliance
WSA: Wilderness Study Area, BLM

Core Natural Areas

Organ-Franklin Mountains.

- Organ Mountains ACEC, BLM
- Organ Mountains WSA, BLM
- Organ Mountains Recreation Area, BLM
- NMWA Wilderness Inventory Area (p)
- BLM trails including Sierra Vista, Bar Canyon, Baylor Pass, and Pine Tree
- San Andres Foothills, CTF Inventory Study Area (p)
- Organ Foothills, CTF Inventory Study Area (p)

Doña Ana Mountains.

- Doña Ana Mountains ACEC, BLM
- Doña Ana Mountains Recreational Area, BLM
- NMSU Chihuahuan Desert Rangeland Research Center public access area
- Chihuahuan Desert Nature Park
- Isaack Playa, CTF Inventory Study Area (p)
- Doña Ana Arroyo

Appendix 4: Inventory

Greater Robledo Mountains Area.

- Robledo Mountains ACEC, BLM
- Robledo Mountains WSA, BLM
- Sierra de las Uvas WSA, BLM
- NMWA Wilderness Inventory Area (p)
- Paleozoic Trackways Research Natural Area, BLM
- Picacho Peak ACEC, BLM
- Butterfield Trail, BLM
- Various canyons: Apache, Box, Faulkner, Foster, Broad and more
- Rio Badlands, CTF Inventory Study Area (p)
- Tonuco Mountain
- Selden Hills

Potrillo-Aden Volcanic Area.

- Aden Lava Flow Research Natural Area, BLM
- Kilbourne Hole National Natural Landmark, BLM
- West Potrillo Mountains WSA, BLM
- NMWA Wilderness Inventory Areas (p)

Caballo-Jornada Area.

- Rincon ACEC, BLM
- NMWA Wilderness Inventory Areas (p)
- Jornada Basin, CTF Inventory Study Area (p)

West Mesa Escarpment.

- Scenic View Rest Area on I-10
- West Mesa Regional Park (p)
- Mesilla Valley Bosque State Park (escarpment and mesa portions)
- Mesilla Phase Jornada Mogollon pit-house culture 850-1100 AD
- Black Mountain, CTF Inventory Study Area (p)

Tortugas Mountain.

- Cultural and Recreational Area (NMSU, BLM, Doña Ana County)
- NASA withdrawal lands
- Corridors providing connection to Organs, CTF Inventory Study Area (p)

Mount Cristo Rey.

- Cretaceous dinosaur trackway

Appendix 4: Inventory

Regional Open Space Parks.

- Burn Lake
- Foothills Landfill
- Oro Vista Retention Pond and Recreation Area
- Villa Mora ponding area
- Lohman extension open space

River Valley Projects

- Mesilla Valley Bosque State Park, Leasburg Dam State Park, Ft. Selden State Monument
- Rio Grande Riparian Ecological Corridor Project Comprehensive Plan
- Elephant Butte Irrigation District, National and State Registers of Historical Places
- Village Districts and Community Districts preserving rural villages
- Los Tules ACEC, BLM
- Camino Real, BLM
- Scenic Highways: Shalom Colony Road, Snow Road, Calle del Norte, Fairacres Road, Highway 28 (p)
- Sunland Park River Trail

Connectors

Major Arroyos and Dams.

- MPO Trail Plan and extension to major arroyos countywide (p)
- Las Cruces Dam Recreation Plan (ACE)

Trails.

- MPO Trail Plan
- Sunland Park River Trail
- La Llorona, Triviz, Griggs/Willoughby pathways (City of Las Cruces)

Columbus Highway Scenic Corridor.

- Abandoned railroad bed (El Paso to Hatchita)