



State Forester Arthur 'Butch' Blazer addresses stakeholders on the challenge and necessity of landscape-scale collaboration.

Wall to wall, all jurisdictions, all ecosystems.

These were the marching orders. Go forth and find any and all data that told a story about New Mexico's natural resources. Trees, grasses, water, wildlife. Pull it all together, and prioritize New Mexico watersheds in meaningful ways.

Developing the New Mexico Statewide Natural Resources Assessment, Strategy, and Response Plan was a team effort. With equally important guidelines from the 2008 U.S. Farm Bill and the 2004 New Mexico Forest and Watershed Health Plan, the time had come for a comprehensive geospatial analysis of the State's ecosystems. The Farm Bill required that each state's Forestry program that received funding through the U.S. Forest Service would complete, by June of 2010, an assessment, strategy, and response plan for prioritizing funding based on resource need.

In New Mexico, an equally compelling document, the Forest and Watershed Health Plan, had identified a similar assessment need watershed by watershed of all natural ecosystems across all ownerships.

Approximately two years ago, the responsibility for coordinating this task was not so much dropped on my desk, but placed there gently. The task was too large for any one person to tackle, but a handful of team members would join forces with a handful of contractors, mix-in a hundred or so "stakeholders" who would represent the diversity of opinions on our natural resources, and then run it past dozens of agency leaders. We would gather more than 70 different layers of data that tell multiple tales of earth, wind, water, and fire. With much input from dozens of organizations, we would combine these layers in various ways to identify where in the state we could focus our energies to be most effective. Although the task would dominate my working hours, I would only be one several folks who would find our nights filled with dreams of watershed boundaries.

As with all things complicated, we took the process step by step. Employed by a small state agency with limited people power, our first task was to contract the heavy lifting for the geospatial analysis and facilitation of the project. Fortunately, our project was building on previous efforts that focused on specific issues like water or wildlife. Many of these projects had partnered with The Nature Conservancy- New Mexico Chapter (TNC). TNC, partnering with The Forest

Guild and The Trust for Public Lands, was awarded the contract and matched the value of the contract to double the impact of the project.

Our next step was to involve many stakeholders to insure that we were taking a balanced, practical approach to working with the data. We met first with tribal resource managers, and then held a large meeting of diverse stakeholders. We formed 9 interagency teams that developed 8 different models: biodiversity, wildfire risk, forest health, water quality, water supply, economic potential, development potential, and green infrastructure. Each team gathered pertinent data layers, determined the value of the data and how to weight each piece in the analysis, and reviewed and tweaked the state maps that identified priority areas for their subject focus.

The intent was to use existing data, and while finding that information, develop a list of what information did not exist. This list of “data gaps” was then prioritized by each technical team. Several teams identified the same gaps in information. As this data is collected, future updates to the statewide assessment will incorporate the new data, fine honing the results.

After the models were built, they were used to create multiple maps of priority watersheds. Each map emphasizes various objectives. Three major themes were 1.) conserving working landscapes, 2.) protecting ecosystems from harm, and 3.) enhancing the public benefit of natural resources.

The statewide assessment is now available online at www.nmforestry.com. In addition to the document, there is a data atlas that describes the source and analysis of the input and links to the final maps and various Geographical Information System (GIS) layers constructed during the project.

Now, funders can require grant applicants to document the importance of their projects. Agencies can work together to target projects in high priority watersheds. Ultimately all of New Mexico benefits by getting the greatest impact with the limited resources available to improve our ecosystems.



Watersheds are the focus of a newly released New Mexico Statewide Natural Resources Assessment, Strategy, and Response Plan.