

For Immediate Release

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Diverse Local Coalition Celebrates Commission Ruling to Protect New Mexico's Outstanding Rivers

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

Santa Fe, NM (December 10, 2024) –A coalition of anglers, local governments, acequia parciantes, and conservation groups is celebrating the New Mexico Water Quality Control Commission's (WQCC) unanimous decision to protect over 250 miles in the Rio Grande, Rio Chama, Cimmaron, Pecos, and Jemez watersheds as [Outstanding National Resource Waters \(ONRWs\)](#) under the [Clean Water Act](#). ONRW designations protect traditional community water uses, and safeguard waterways from the degradation new uses often inflict. The proposal was brought forward by the New Mexico Environment Department, as part of the Lujan Grisham administration's commitment to protecting the state's surface waters. Amigos Bravos and Trout Unlimited, represented by Western Environmental Law Center, were parties in the proceeding and provided evidence in support of the nomination.

*"Designating these rivers as 'Outstanding' is not just about conserving our waters—it's about safeguarding our way of life, our local economies, and time-tested traditions," said **Taos County Commissioner AnJanette Brush**. "This is a decision rooted in common sense and community values – ensuring clean water and healthy wildlife for our families and businesses."*

Designating the streams as outstanding waters will help preserve clean water for New Mexico's centuries-old acequias and adjacent communities, as well as popular streams for fishing and native trout conservation. The majority of the designated waters are managed as Special Trout Waters in recognition of their popularity within the angling community, and their importance to conserving populations for Rio Grande cutthroat trout, New Mexico's state fish. The designations apply only to water quality - they do not impact water rights or pre-existing land uses.

Ralph A. Vigil, a 7th-generation acequia parciante from Pecos and former Chairman of the NM Acequia Commission, said, “This ruling is a tremendous victory for our communities and our way of life. Protecting New Mexico’s outstanding waters ensures that the clean, life-giving waters flowing through our acequias remain pristine for future generations. These waters not only nourish our crops but also sustain our culture, traditions, and families. Clean water is essential to who we are as a people, and this decision is a crucial step toward preserving our heritage and ensuring a sustainable future for all.”

Water-based recreational activities like fishing and boating are a major contributor to the state’s outdoor recreation industry, which contributes [\\$3.2 billion](#) to the economy. Additionally, fishing and hunting [support](#) almost 8,000 New Mexico jobs, generating economic opportunity in communities adjacent to the protected waters, and beyond.

*“People come from near and far to experience all that New Mexico’s freshwaters and healthy lands have to offer,” said **Ivan Valdez, owner of the Reel Life in Santa Fe.** “Our rural economies depend upon real, hands-on jobs that are fueled by our great outdoors. I want to thank the New Mexico Water Quality Control Commission for investing in our workers and protecting our bottom line.”*

The designated waters include river and stream segments found in state and national parks, wildlife refuges, and national monuments, as well as many of the state’s Special Trout Waters. The waters represent some of the best trout fishing streams in the state, while also providing important refuge for other native fish and wildlife species.

*“The newly protected rivers are more than just fishing spots—they’re a big part of why anglers from all over come to New Mexico. By protecting them as Outstanding National Resource Waters, the commission has safeguarded clean, healthy waterways for the fish we depend upon,” added **Ben Mortensen, an angler in Taos.***

The designation is the third such effort to be approved under the Lujan Grisham administration, adding to previous protections for the headwaters of the Pecos River and a petition to protect the Rio Grande and other recreationally significant waters that was championed by the state’s Outdoor Recreation Division. In total, over 500 stream miles have been designated as outstanding waters under Lujan Grisham’s tenure.

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