



Little Tesuque Creek Open Space Management Plan



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Executive Summary

The Little Tesuque Creek Open Space (LTCOS) is a 161-acre property in central Santa Fe County that encompasses a portion of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains foothills. The property was recommended for purchase by the County Open Lands, Trails and Parks Advisory Committee (COLTPAC), and was purchased by Santa Fe County in 2005. The primary reasons for acquisition were to link the Dale Ball Trail system with the Santa Fe National Forest trail network, and to conserve the property's diverse natural resources. The goal of this plan is to provide a practical and effective management approach for the LTCOS to maintain these attributes.

The LTCOS contains a popular day-use trail, as well as numerous important ecosystems including riparian forest, persistent piñon-juniper woodland, ponderosa pine forest, and dry mixed-conifer forest. Management challenges for the LTCOS include establishing safe public access, reducing user impacts on sensitive ecosystems, limiting access to areas outside of trails, and long-term climate driven change. This management plan outlines a vision, as well as strategies to protect the LTCOS by reducing user impacts, improving wetland and riparian ecosystems, improving forest resilience to climate change, and removing non-native invasive species.

This management plan identifies short-, mid-, and long-term management priorities for the property.

Short-Term Priorities:

The short-term priorities include reduction of user impacts on natural resources, baseline wildlife surveys, removal of invasive species, and ecosystem restoration to include rerouting the trail to protect riparian habitat and riparian areas.

Mid-to-Long Term Priorities:

In the mid-to-long term, Santa Fe County strives to conduct long-term monitoring, address erosion issues, conduct forest management, and provide interpretation opportunities at the property.

Little Tesuque Creek Management Plan Goals

This management plan for the LTCOS outlines how Santa Fe County plans to manage this unique property for a variety of stakeholders and reflects the County's desire to create an exceptional Santa Fe County Open Space and Trails system.



Native pineywoods geranium (Geranium caespitosum) at the Little Tesuque Creek Open Space

1. Background and Existing Conditions

1.1 Plan Purpose and Need

The Little Tesuque Creek Open Space Management Plan was developed in order to prioritize management activities in a way that best protects and preserves the natural and recreational resources of the property. The LTCOS Management Plan provides direction and specific action priorities for short-term, mid-term, and long-term phases. The purpose of the Little Tesuque Creek Open Space Management Plan is to:

- clarify priorities for maintenance and protection,
- identify projects for future investments,
- describe a management approach to planning, implementation and maintenance activities, and
- identify stewardship and educational opportunities.

This plan arose from a growing need for a strong vision with clear objectives and strategies for resource conservation, passive recreation, and education.

This management plan is intended to provide information to the public, volunteers, residents, and trail users to better understand the conditions of the property and to establish the County management vision, goals and strategies for the LTCOS.

1.2 Plan Process

The Little Tesuque Creek Open Space Management Plan is informed by the County's initial goals for acquisition of the LTCOS, natural resource management and conservation

priorities, and a set of planning principles. The planning principles are based on the goals of the Santa Fe County Open Space and Trails Program as outlined in the 2019 Open Space, Trails and Parks Strategic Management Plan.¹

1.2.1 Initial Goals for Acquisition of Little Tesuque Creek Open Space

1. Provide a connection between the Dale Ball Trail system and the Santa Fe National Forest trail network
2. Natural resource conservation

1.2.2 Planning Principles

- Adhere to the goals and purpose of the Santa Fe County Open Space, Trails and Parks program, including those found in the 2019 Open Space, Trails and Parks Strategic Management Plan
- Promote public safety and access based on the reasons for acquiring the property
- Develop sustainable facilities to keep maintenance needs to a minimum
- Invest in strategic, cost effective, long-term improvements
- Minimize the disturbance of ecological and cultural resources
- Restore and conserve important ecosystems
- Engage youth and create educational opportunities

1.2.3 Plan Updates

This management plan is intended to provide guidance for the time frame of approximately 10-15 years. Plan information is more specific for the short-term (*1-5 years*), descriptive for the mid-term (*5-10 years*), and preliminary for the long-term (*beyond 10 years*). Changing community needs, environmental conditions, and County

¹ Available at
https://www.santafecountynm.gov/open_space_and_trails_program/ostp-strategic-management-plan

capacity will lead to the need for adjustments to this plan. This plan should be evaluated every two years or as is possible with staff capacity to determine progress toward stated goals. After the mid-term span of 10 years, this plan will need to be updated.

1.3 Property Description & Existing Conditions Assessment

1.3.1 Description

The LTCOS is a 161-acre property that is part of a larger, undeveloped area that includes property owned by the Santa Fe National Forest and the City of Santa Fe. The property is located at 534 and 554 NM 475 in Santa Fe, NM. The Santa Fe Conservation Trust holds a conservation easement on the western parcel of the LTCOS. The purpose of the conservation easement is to ensure the preservation and protection of the property's natural, scenic, and open space character. This includes, but is not limited to, preservation and protection of wildlife habitats, soils, water quality, and old-growth ponderosa pine and Douglas fir.

1.3.2 Ecosystems

The LTCOS contains numerous ecosystems, including riparian forest, persistent piñon-juniper woodland, ponderosa pine forest, and dry mixed-conifer forest. Persistent piñon-juniper woodlands are found on south- and west-facing slopes, ponderosa pine forests and dry mixed-conifer forests are found on north- and east-facing slopes, and riparian forests are found along the Little Tesuque Creek. Risks to the property's diverse natural character include high-severity wildfire, erosion, negative impacts from recreation, and long-term climate driven change.



1.3.2 Improvements and Existing Infrastructure

1.3.2.1 Existing Infrastructure

Infrastructure is limited at the Little Tesuque Creek Open Space and includes signage, trails, and old roads. There are also five climbing anchors installed in a rock outcrop near the trailhead.

1.3.2.2 Trails

The primary trail continues along the Little Tesuque Creek. Two additional spur trails connect to the Santa Fe National Forest trail system (Juan Trail and Carol Trail). The Little Tesuque Creek trail continues into the Arroyo de la Piedra Open Space and the Dale Ball Trail System on the western edge of the property. There is also access to a private trail maintained by Bishop's Lodge at the western edge.

1.3.2.3 Roads

Numerous old roads exist on the property. All of these roads are in poor condition and are causing excessive soil erosion. The roads are not part of the trail system. However, one of the old roads is identified on the plat as a "private pedestrian trail easement" to provide access to the open space property from a neighboring HOA. This trail has not yet been developed.

1.3.2.4 Signs

Signage on the property consists of trail and informational signs.

1.3.2.5 Rock Climbing

A rocky outcrop near the trailhead, dubbed "Rat's Peak" by climbers, has five top-rope anchors installed. Access to climbing is by unofficial social trails on the hillside. The climbing routes are listed on at least two climbing websites (The Crag, Mountain Project).

This was an established climbing site prior to County ownership of the open space property. There are 12 named routes at this crag.

2. Restrictions, Issues and Challenges

2.1 Restrictions

The conservation easement held by the Santa Fe Conservation Trust on the western parcel of the LTCOS prohibits the following:

1. Buildings and other structures
2. New roads
3. Motor vehicle use, including motorcycles and all-terrain vehicles
4. Utilities and rights-of-way
5. Impervious surfaces
6. Mining
7. Refuse dumping
8. Commercial timber harvesting
9. Livestock grazing that degrades or deteriorates the range, aquatic resources, and wildlife habitats

2.2 Issues and Challenges

2.2.1 Access

Steep slopes limit access to much of the property. The conservation easement held on the property also includes access limitations, including prohibiting new roads, the use of motor vehicles on the property, and the creation of new walkways that are not consistent with the purposes of the easement.

Access is further limited by the lack of an official parking area/trailhead access from Hyde Park Road (NM 475). Currently, parking is limited on the south side of Hyde Park Road and users must cross traffic to access the designated trail, which raises safety concerns. It was possible to park on both sides of the road but recent erosion on the north side of NM 475 now makes this impossible. Users can park at the Sierra del Norte Trailhead, approximately one mile east by road, and hike to LTCOS via the Dale Ball and Arroyo de la Piedra trails. Walking along NM 475 is not a safe access option. County staff is coordinating with the New Mexico Department of Transportation (NMDOT) to address trailhead parking access issues as the erosion is within NMDOT right-of-way.

2.2.2 Trail System

The current Little Tesuque Creek trail provides access to the property, connections to the Dale Ball Trail system, and connections to the Santa Fe National Forest. The trail contains several unsustainable portions that are causing negative impacts to the property's natural resources, including water quality, soils, and wildlife habitat. Additionally, numerous unsanctioned social trails also negatively impact the property's natural resources. There is a need to reroute portions of the trail away from the creek bottom to protect the riparian ecosystem. A trail reroute study was conducted in 2022. Funding was secured in 2024 to implement the reroute and needed trail improvements.



Current trail alignment demonstrating proximity to creek

3. Natural and Cultural Resources

3.1 Wildlife and Plants

The property has a variety of diverse habitats for plants and animals. Baseline wildlife surveys have documented 77 species at the LTCOS, including mammals, birds, reptiles, and invertebrates. This number will continue to grow as staff, volunteers, and contractors spend more time monitoring the property. Many of the documented species, including the Pinyon Jay (*Gymnorhinus cyanocephalus*), Grace's Warbler (*Setophaga graciae*), and Juniper Titmouse (*Baeolophus ridgwayi*) have high conservation needs. Additionally, the property appears to be important for bats, containing high quality habitat and a perennial water source. Plant surveys revealed one state-listed rare plant species on site, cyanic milkvetch (*Astragalus cyaneus*).

3.2 Water Quality

The current sanctioned trail system runs along the Little Tesuque Creek. Several sections of the trail are eroding into the creek, which is likely negatively affecting water quality in the creek.

Numerous unsanctioned trails and dogs off-leash are also causing erosion issues close to the creek, thus also potentially negatively impacting water quality. Dog owners who do not pick up dog excrement also compromise the water quality of the creek.



Little Tesuque Creek as it runs through the open space property

3.3 Non-Native Invasive Species

Numerous non-native, invasive species have been documented on the property, including Cheatgrass (*Bromus tectorum*), Russian olive (*Elaeagnus angustifolia*), and Siberian elm (*Ulmus pumila*). A plant survey conducted by the University of New Mexico found Canada thistle (*Cirsium arvense*), Dalmatian toadflax (*Linaria dalmatica*), diffuse knapweed (*Centaurea diffusa*), and Siberian pea shrub (*Caragana arborescens*). The latter is only known in two locations in New Mexico, one of which is LTCOS. The survey found another notable exotic on this Open Space, feverfew (*Tanacetum parthenium*), which is the first record of this species outside of cultivation in New Mexico.

3.4 Soil and Erosion

Soil is significantly eroding in numerous places due to past land management, current recreation, and terrain conditions. In addition, flows off of Hyde Park Road are dumping trash, sediment, and large debris into the Little Tesuque Creek. Coordinating with neighboring landowners to implement complementary remedies to erosion on shared slopes will likely produce the best results. In the fall of 2024, a youth crew from Rocky Mountain Youth Corps (RMYC) spent an 8-day stint on site addressing erosional features on south-facing slopes. The crew used existing rocks and branches to create check dams along drainages to slow and spread water as it falls steeply from the foothills. They were also able to work on trail grading at the trailhead and in places where water had moved sediment and debris across the trail.



Erosion feature on the open space

3.5 Forest Health and Fire Danger

Fire danger at the LTCOS is low in some ecosystems and moderate to high in other ecosystems. Some ecosystems on the property have an historic high-severity, low-frequency fire regime (persistent piñon-juniper woodland), while others have an historic low-severity, high frequency fire regime (ponderosa pine forest, dry mixed-conifer forest), and still others have a low severity, low-frequency fire regime (riparian forest). Differing historical fire regimes, as well as differing wildlife species' needs, necessitate different management approaches for these ecosystem types at LTCOS.



Uplands habitat characterized by piñon pine (Pinus edulis) and yucca (Yucca sp.)

3.6 Climate Change

Climate change is driving and will continue to drive changes at the LTCOS. Fire danger is increasing due to excessive time since the last burn, increased temperatures, and prolonged drought. Trees are succumbing to conditions caused and exacerbated by a changing climate. The perennial Little Tesuque Creek is increasingly running dry during portions of the year. Improving the property's climate resiliency through forest management, soil protection, wetland restoration, and other management activities is a priority for the LTCOS, as well as all open space properties.

3.7 Cultural Resources

A class three archaeological survey was conducted at the Little Tesuque Creek Open Space in 2008. No archaeological sites were documented, but one historic site was identified. The historic site consists of the 1933 Hyde Park Road original alignment and an associated Civilian Conservation Corps stone bridge across Little Tesuque Creek.

4. Management Plan

4.1 Vision

At the Little Tesuque Creek Open Space recreation and natural resource conservation is properly balanced, so that Santa Fe County residents, as well as native wildlife, may continue to benefit from use of the property. The property continues to be a place where County residents may connect to and learn about nature, while also being an important refuge for biodiversity and wildlife species of high conservation need. Management of the property is science-based, adaptive, progressive, and serves as an example for other natural resource management agencies and organizations.

4.2 Management Goals

The Little Tesuque Creek Open Space goals are actions consistent with the property vision that can be implemented and monitored.

4.2.1 Specific Management Goals

Specific management goals in support of the Little Tesuque Creek Open Space vision take into account:

- ***Holistic & Inclusive Management:*** The LTCOS is managed in a transparent manner through on-going communication with the community about planning, implementation, and maintenance activities for the site.
- ***Ecological Health:*** The ecological health and resilience of the LTCOS is maintained through protection and restoration of its varied ecosystems.
- ***Cultural Resources:*** The cultural resources on the LTCOS are conserved through in-situ protection.
- ***Access:*** The LTCOS balances desires for increased community visitation and trail connections with the goal to protect the site.
- ***Infrastructure:*** Infrastructure at the LTCOS is limited and designed and maintained to minimize impacts on the property.

4.3 Little Tesuque Creek Open Space Management Plan

The plan for LTCOS describes management strategies, projects, and associated investments to support the LTCOS vision and management goals. The plan recommends planning actions, projects with their purposes and priority, maintenance and community stewardship activities, and a possible timeline for implementation.

Plan actions are focused on:

1. Achieving sustainable access to the site, as well as protection of soils and water quality, by rerouting unsustainable trails, closing unsanctioned trails, restoring native plants on old, eroding roads, preserving existing trail connections, seeking opportunities for additional trail connections, and improving parking safety.
2. Protection of wildlife and plant species of conservation need.

3. Restoration of wetland and riparian habitats using low-tech process-based restoration, including beaver dam analogues and post-assisted log structures. Beaver dam analogues replicate the important wetland ecosystem services previously provided by abundant beaver populations. Rerouting portions of the trail out of the creek bed will also contribute to the restoration of wetland and riparian habitats.
4. Management of non-native, invasive plant species.
5. Restoration of the property's ponderosa pine and dry mixed-conifer habitats, using ecologically appropriate forest management practices.
6. Interpretation of the property's varied natural and cultural resources.
7. Incorporation of volunteer assistance, whenever possible.
8. Involvement of youth in numerous management activities through partnerships with youth groups, such as the Rocky Mountain Youth Corps and local schools.

4.4 Monitoring and Maintenance

Recommendations for maintenance include the following:

1. A maintenance schedule will be developed which includes seasonal tasks related to natural resource management and infrastructure maintenance.
2. The County will collaborate with civic organizations, other agencies and organizations, and community stewards to leverage partnerships for monitoring and maintenance of the property.
3. The County will invest in smaller, consistent, well-planned maintenance activities.

4. The County will conduct maintenance activities at the optimum time based on monitoring or a regular schedule.

4.4.1 Terrain Management Units

Terrain management units (TMU) are based upon recreational areas, as well as different ecosystems. The units are as follows:

1. LTCOS-TRL: Trail corridor
2. LTCOS-RIP: Riparian Habitat
3. LTCOS-PJ: Persistent Piñon-Juniper Woodland
4. LTCOS-PP/MC: Ponderosa Pine and Dry Mixed-Conifer Forests

4.4.2 Monitoring

Monitoring is an important way to ensure the vision and goals of the property are being met. Monitoring activities will include assessment of wetland, riparian, forest, and woodland health; evaluation of erosion issues; and measuring the success of management activities. Additional monitoring will focus on site safety, including trail conditions (Table 1).



View of the Little Tesuque Creek corridor from above; note cottonwoods (yellowing/bright green trees) delineating riparian area

Table 1: Monitoring

No.	Terrain Mgmt. Unit (TMU)	Conditions Monitored	Mgmt. Objectives	Indicators and Monitoring Method	Monitoring Frequency and Season
1	LTCOS-TRL	Trail condition	Ecological health and public safety	Visual assessment and photo documentation of any issues; public comment submitted to maintenance foreman	At least once a season and after large rain or run-off events (i.e. more often in spring and during monsoon season)
2	LTCOS-RIP	Landscape ecological health	Ecological health	Visual assessment and photo documentation; invasive species presence/absence and abundance	At least once per season, visits throughout growing season aid in invasive species monitoring
3	LTCOS-PJ	Landscape ecological health	Ecological health	Visual assessment and photo documentation; invasive species presence/absence and abundance	At least once per season, visits throughout growing season aid in invasive species monitoring
4	LTCOS-PP/MC	Landscape ecological health	Ecological health	Visual assessment and photo documentation; invasive species presence/absence and abundance	At least once per season, visits throughout growing season aid in invasive species monitoring

4.4.3 Assessments and Studies

Baseline wildlife assessments have been conducted at the LTCOS, documenting numerous bird, mammal, reptile, and invertebrate species. Additionally, a trail assessment to determine potential reroutes and improvements has been conducted, and the locations for trail improvements and a minor reroute have been identified. A number of assessments, however, still need to be completed to inform management and operations in the short-, mid-, and long-term. Assessments of LTCOS include the following:

- Surveys documenting fish use of the property (not yet initiated)
- Water quality assessment
- Erosion assessment (remediation underway)
- Parking assessment

4.5 Plan Implementation

Plan implementation will focus on short-term priority goals outlined below. Prioritization will be based on balancing tasks on all properties, as well as on staff and funding available to accomplish tasks. A matrix of recommended management activities over the short-, mid-, and long-term phases is contained in an overall Management Activities Matrix for the Little Tesuque Creek Open Space (Table 2).

Table 2: Management Activities Matrix

Project	Short-Term 1-5 Yrs	Mid-Term 5-10 Yrs	Long-Term 10+ Yrs	Resources Needed
1. Conduct baseline fish surveys				Staff, consultant
2. Reroute trails causing damage to natural resources and close unsanctioned trails				Staff, youth crews, consultant
3. Create, and implement, a wetland and riparian restoration plan				Staff, consultant
4. Implement invasive species management plan				Staff, volunteers
5. Initiate long-term photo monitoring				Volunteers
6. Investigate need and potential for alternative parking location(s) for trail users				Staff
7. Conduct forest management in ponderosa pine and dry mixed-conifer habitats				Staff, youth crews
8. Begin addressing erosion issues				Staff, youth crews
9. Begin restoring old roads with native seed				Staff, volunteers
10. If feasible, develop alternative parking location(s) for trail users				Consultant
11. Create and implement educational and interpretative programming				Staff, volunteers

4.5.1 Short Term

Recommended short-term activities include:

1. Implement trail reroute and improvements and appropriate measures to close old trail alignment
2. Develop a wetland and riparian restoration plan, including installation of beaver dam analogues and other low-tech, process-based restoration structures
3. Begin management of invasive plant species

4.5.2 Resources for Implementation of Management Plan

Santa Fe County owns and manages 6,800 acres of open space properties and park areas. Current staff resources and funding availability limit the ability to meet all the management goals for all of these properties. Santa Fe County will be able to successfully implement this plan if it receives continued funding commitments, which could be enhanced by identifying new funding mechanisms. Allocating appropriate resources to implement this management plan could also result in accelerated timelines of the projects listed in the Management Activities Matrix.

Achieving the goals of this management plan, including the Management Activities Matrix, will require support from Open Space Resource Management, Planning and Ranger staff. Needed staff commitments from Maintenance Technician staff should not increase, since one of the goals of this plan is to continue to have limited infrastructure that minimizes impacts on the property, which would keep needed infrastructure maintenance to current levels. County staff will conduct a staffing study for the Open Space, Trails and Parks program in Fiscal Year 2026 to gain an informed understanding of the staffing requirements for the management of this property and others. Cultivating collaborative relationships with volunteers, youth groups, neighbors, local stakeholders, and other

interest groups can reduce needed staff commitments for the successful management of this property and increase community ownership and stewardship of the Little Tesuque Creek Open Space.

