

Santa Fe County Open Space, Trails and Parks

Annual Report

2022



SANTA FE COUNTY



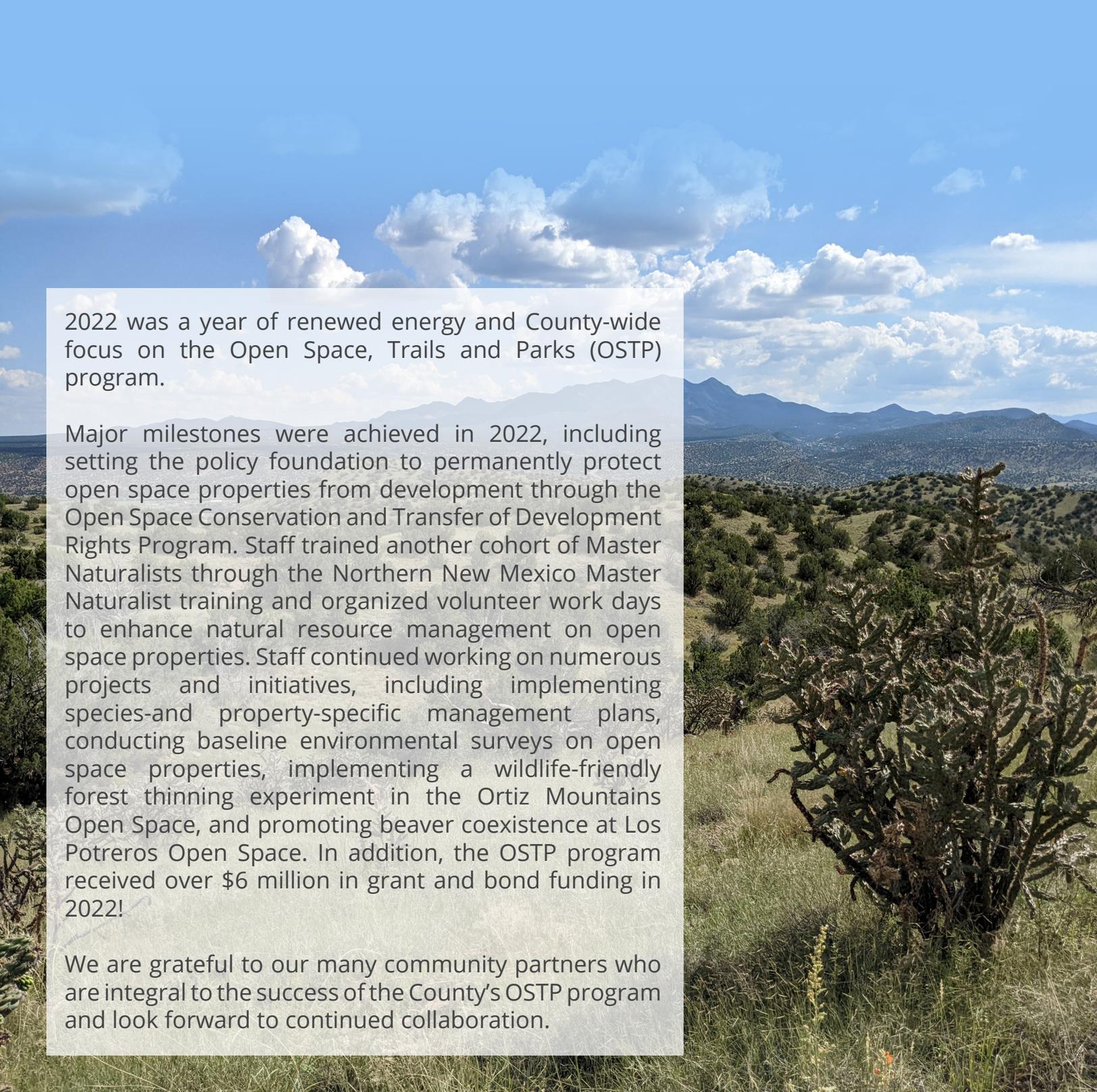


Vision

Santa Fe County's Open Space, Trails and Parks Program sustainably manages and conserves a vibrant network of cultural, historical, recreational and natural community resources that inspire a deep sense of regional identity and stewardship among current and future generations.

Mission

Santa Fe County provides innovative leadership in local land management and conservation that enhances the quality of life for County residents, provides access to public lands for unique outdoor experiences, advances community stewardship through partnerships and effectively leverages community investments in the Open Space, Trails and Parks Program. Management of County open spaces and trail networks provides sustainable and resilient ecosystems with landscape-wide benefits for human, plant, and wildlife communities.



2022 was a year of renewed energy and County-wide focus on the Open Space, Trails and Parks (OSTP) program.

Major milestones were achieved in 2022, including setting the policy foundation to permanently protect open space properties from development through the Open Space Conservation and Transfer of Development Rights Program. Staff trained another cohort of Master Naturalists through the Northern New Mexico Master Naturalist training and organized volunteer work days to enhance natural resource management on open space properties. Staff continued working on numerous projects and initiatives, including implementing species- and property-specific management plans, conducting baseline environmental surveys on open space properties, implementing a wildlife-friendly forest thinning experiment in the Ortiz Mountains Open Space, and promoting beaver coexistence at Los Potreros Open Space. In addition, the OSTP program received over \$6 million in grant and bond funding in 2022!

We are grateful to our many community partners who are integral to the success of the County's OSTP program and look forward to continued collaboration.



2022 Accomplishments

Below are the accomplishments of the OSTP program in 2022. They are grouped by sections consistent with the 2019 OSTP Strategic Plan. Highlighted projects are featured in this report.

Resource Management

- Completed bat surveys on 10 open space properties
- Conducted a pollinator habitat enhancement experiment at Thornton Ranch Open Space in partnership with Master Naturalists and Xerces society
- Installed erosion control wattles at Thornton Ranch Open Space in partnership with Master Naturalists
- Conducted Pinyon Jay monitoring at Thornton Ranch Open Space; the Pinyon Jay was recently petitioned for listing under the U.S. Endangered Species Act
- Continued first phase of forest enhancement project at Ortiz Mountains Open Space in partnership with the County Wildland Fire Crew, Rocky Mountain Youth Corps, and Defenders of Wildlife to reduce wildfire fuels and improve wildlife habitat in ponderosa pine forests
- Continued a collaborative project evaluating thinning impacts on imperiled piñon-juniper bird species in partnership with Audubon Southwest, Santa Fe National Forest, Bird Conservancy of the Rockies, Defenders of Wildlife, New Mexico State Land Office, and other partners. The Ortiz Mountains Open Space is one of the monitoring sites for this statewide project.
- Monitored for the presence of barrel cactus at Arroyo Hondo Open Space in partnership with Master Naturalists
- Monitored for the presence of monarchs at La Cieneguilla, Los Potreros, and Arroyo Hondo Open Spaces in partnership with Master Naturalists
- Conducted invasive species management at Los Potreros Open Space and Arroyo Hondo Open Space in partnership with Rocky Mountain Youth Corps and Master Naturalists
- Planted pollinator-friendly species at Los Potreros Open Space with Master Naturalists
- Completed implementation of Rio Quemado restoration project at Los Potreros Open Space as part of a project funded by the New Mexico Environment Department

2022 Accomplishments

- Promoted beaver coexistence at Los Potreros Open Space in partnership with Rio Grande Return and Defenders of Wildlife. Work included caging valued trees to protect them from being felled by beavers, installing “pond-levelers” to keep beaver ponds from flooding neighboring properties, caging acequia headgates so that they are not blocked by beavers, hosting community meetings in Chimayo, and continuing to work with the local community to prevent negative impacts of beavers while also promoting the many positive impacts of beavers, such as increased water availability for farmers, cleaner water, reduced fire risk, and improved habitat for numerous wildlife species.
- Completed 120-150 work orders per month to maintain trails and open space properties

Educational Programming and Stewardship

- Facilitated the 2022 Northern New Mexico Master Naturalist training course in partnership with Audubon Southwest and the Santa Fe Botanical Garden
- Trained 6 new Master Naturalist volunteers to be open space property stewards. Property stewards monitor open space properties for issues like erosion, fencing repairs, illegal access, and unsanctioned trails, and report on plant and wildlife species found at the property.
- Enhanced the open space volunteer program, including Master Naturalist outreach and curriculum

Project Development and Implementation

- Completed Little Tesuque Creek Open Space trail re-route analysis
- Completed design for Romero Park Phase II. Project to include pickle ball courts, a volleyball court, a game area, a small picnic shelter (36-40 capacity) adjacent to a native grass lawn, parking area expansion, additional connected walking paths, and historic dump site cleanup.

Planning and Program Development

- Developed conservation program for open space properties through the Open Space Conservation and Transfer of Development Rights Program in collaboration with COLTPAC

2022 Funding

The OSTP program received more than \$6,000,000 in funding from grants and bonds in 2022! Below is the list of grant and bond funding received.

- \$272,508 grant awarded by the Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality Improvement Program (CMAQ) to design Arroyo Hondo Trail Segment 1. CMAQ is a federal program administered in New Mexico by the NM Department of Transportation.
- \$5,000,000 approved by voters in a General Obligation Bond for the design and construction of the Santa Fe River Trail and Thornton Ranch Open Space
- \$678,178 grant received from the U.S. Department of Commerce Economic Development Administration to construct Santa Fe Rail Trail Segment 6, from Spur Ranch Road to US Hwy 285
- \$100,000 grant received from the State of New Mexico to install shade structures at Galisteo Park
- \$50,000 grant received from the State of New Mexico build Carlson Park. The 0.37-acre park in the Carlson neighborhood will include an ADA parking slot, fenced area, half-court basketball pad, playground, 2 sheltered pads with picnic tables, and a swing set.





PROJECT HIGHLIGHT: ORTIZ MOUNTAINS OPEN SPACE FOREST MANAGEMENT

The Ortiz Mountains Open Space is a biologically diverse area home to numerous ecosystem types, including piñon-juniper woodlands, ponderosa pine forests, dry mixed-conifer forests, and Gambel oak. It is also home to several wildlife species of conservation need such as the Pinyon Jay, Grace's Warbler, Virginia's Warbler, Juniper Titmouse, Black-chinned Sparrow, and Townsend's Big-eared Bat. The Ortiz Mountains Open Space Management Plan identifies ecological health as a management goal, and specifies using science-based natural resource management and monitoring principles to achieve management goals.

One of the management challenges identified in the plan is balancing wildlife habitat needs with fuels reduction to reduce the risk of high severity wildfires. Due to past land management practices, ponderosa pine forests on the property are primarily composed of dense stands of small trees, posing a high fire risk. The County aims to reduce the risk of high severity wildfire and improve forest health by slowly transitioning these dense forests into stands with fewer, larger trees.

Open space staff and the County's Wildland Fire Crew, along with Rocky Mountain Youth Corps crews and Defenders of Wildlife, have worked diligently to reduce catastrophic fire risk while improving wildlife habitat in the Ortiz Mountains Open Space using a wildlife-friendly thinning prescription in ponderosa pine and dry mixed-conifer forests. The thinning prescription retains significantly more canopy cover than prescriptions solely focused on fuels reduction. In addition, thinning occurs only in the fall to prevent disturbance to nesting bird species during the breeding season.

To evaluate project success, County open space staff and Defenders of Wildlife are measuring canopy cover and monitoring the density and occupancy of Grace's Warblers before thinning and at regular intervals after thinning, both at the thinned treatment sites and an unthinned control site. The County has selected Grace's Warbler as an indicator species to assess management success because their population is linked to ponderosa pine forest health. In addition, thanks to their song, Grace's Warblers are relatively easy to monitor compared to other wildlife species, such as mammals or reptiles. Outcomes of the study will inform adaptive management strategies, such as if thinning needs to be halted, or if additional thinning is necessary.

PROJECT HIGHLIGHT: BAT SURVEYS

The Southwest is the most diverse region for bats in the United States. Of the approximately 45 bat species occurring in the United States, 19 are known to occur in Santa Fe County. In 2022, the OSTP Program conducted surveys on ten open space properties using ultrasonic bat detectors to evaluate the presence of different bat species and identify their roosting sites (where bats congregate for sleeping, winter hibernation, or breeding). The primary goals of this assessment were to identify key roosting features, determine if species of conservation need are present on open space properties, and assess potential habitat improvements for each property to support the conservation of bat species.

18 bat species were found within the survey parcels, of which two are listed by New Mexico Game and Fish as being species of greatest conservation need. The open space property with the highest number of species was Thornton Ranch Open Space, which had all 18 bat species! 16 species were found at the Ortiz Mountains Open Space, and 15 at Cerrillos Hills State Park, which is owned by Santa Fe County.

Understanding which bat species occur on the County's open spaces allows staff to incorporate their needs into open space management plans. For example, knowing where bat roosts occur allows staff to avoid disturbing these important sites when building trails, rerouting trails, or developing other types of recreational infrastructure.

TRAIL HIGHLIGHT: ARROYO HONDO TRAIL

The Arroyo Hondo Trail is a regional multi-modal commuter and recreational trail in Santa Fe County's Community College District. Currently under construction, the trail will run from the Rail Runner station at NM 599 to the Santa Fe Community College, then continue north along Richards Avenue and connect to the future NE/SE Connector. There are five phases to the Arroyo Hondo Trail, with a total length of approximately six miles. The project includes land acquisition, trail construction, drainage improvements, trailhead installation and improvements, and signage.

Multi-use trails have a positive effect on the economic vitality and quality of neighborhoods by providing an alternative mode of travel with safe access to residential, commercial, educational, and recreational areas. The trail will also benefit area residents by providing enhanced multimodal links between communities and commuting options to Santa Fe and Los Alamos via train and bus connections at the NM 599 Rail Runner station. Reducing the number of trips in single-occupancy vehicles is key to reducing greenhouse emissions associated with transportation. This is important considering that transportation is the highest source of emissions in Santa Fe County.

The cost of the trail is \$5.6 million, much of which is being leveraged through federal grant funding. Construction is expected to be complete by 2026.



COMMUNITY HIGHLIGHT: New Mexico BioPark Society

In the summer of 2022, County open space staff spotted fireflies at Los Potreros Open Space in Chimayo. Fireflies are rare in New Mexico, and suspected to be declining worldwide. Staff reported the sighting to the Western Firefly Project, a community science platform where anyone can submit firefly observations across the West. The next day, staff was contacted by Anna Walker, the Species Survival Officer for Invertebrates with the New Mexico BioPark Society. Walker monitors the Western Firefly Project, and relies on reports from community members to learn where fireflies occur in the Intermountain West.

Walker informed staff that the firefly population at Los Potreros Open Space is a new species in the *Photuris* genus of fireflies, and is currently being described by scientists. According to Walker, Santa Fe County's work to promote beaver co-existence with neighboring community members helped create habitat for fireflies. Firefly larvae require a permanent source of water, which the resident beavers provide. Staff will continue to conserve fireflies, as well as the many other wildlife and plant species that occur at Los Potreros Open Space.

The New Mexico BioPark Society is a non-profit organization that supports the work of the ABQ BioPark. As such, they fund conservation projects at home and abroad, and staff members work to conserve endangered and threatened species across the West. Santa Fe County relies on partnerships for the successful management of the OSTP program, and is grateful for the New Mexico BioPark Society's expertise and commitment to conservation, which led to this exciting discovery.



PROGRAM HIGHLIGHT: OPEN SPACE CONSERVATION & TRANSFER OF DEVELOPMENT RIGHTS

The County Open Lands, Trails and Parks Advisory Committee (COLTPAC)—a voluntary committee appointed by the Board of County Commissioners whose role is to advise the Board on matters relating to open space, trails and parks—identified a goal for the permanent protection of all Santa Fe County owned open space properties. In 2022, the policy framework to achieve this goal was set following the Board of County Commissioners approval of COLTPAC’s recommendation to conserve Santa Fe County open space properties through the Open Space Conservation and Transfer of Development Rights (TDR) Program.

COLTPAC is aware that most County open space properties are not permanently protected from development, and committee members addressed a concern for permanent protection of County open space properties. COLTPAC formed a Conservation Subcommittee to consider options for permanent protection of County open space properties and concluded that TDRs are the best tool to conserve open space properties since TDRs provide a permanent and enforceable restriction on future development.

TDRs are a conservation tool regulated by Santa Fe County’s Sustainable Land Development Code to preserve agricultural areas, environmentally-sensitive areas, rural open space, scenic vistas, and other areas of special character. TDR Sending Areas—areas from which landowners remove their right to develop the property—are designated through a TDR Sending Area Plat and a TDR agreement, which permanently restricts development on the sending area.

In 2022, staff initiated the process to sever development rights from all County open space properties. As part of this process, staff has prioritized properties based on factors such as the property’s conservation values, number of potential development rights, ease of TDR qualification, and geographic distribution by County Commission district. Severing development rights from these properties to ensure the permanent protection of open space is aligned with the County’s commitment to 30x30, a state, national, and global initiative to protect 30% of the planet’s lands and waters by 2030 to preserve the Earth’s biodiversity and stabilize the climate.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Santa Fe County Board of County Commissioners

Henry P. Roybal – District 1

Anna Hansen – District 2

Rudy N. Garcia – District 3

Anna T. Hamilton – District 4

Hank Hughes – District 5

County Leadership

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Penny Ellis-Green, Growth Management Director

Robert Griego, Planning Manager

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Linda Siegle, At-Large, Vice Chair

Sandra Madrid Massengill, District 1

Christopher Mann, District 2

Genna Waldvogel, District 4

Jan Cohen, District 5

Elise Apple Snider, At-Large

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