

SIERRA SOIL AND WATER CONSERVATION DISTRICT ANNUAL REPORT FOR THE PERIOD OF JULY 1, 2022 TO JUNE 30, 2023



Black Willow Harvesting Project location, Caballo, NM

The Board of Supervisors of the Sierra Soil and Water Conservation District continue to grow and expand their District programs and are excited that the community is recognizing the District as the leader in addressing the natural resource needs within the boundaries of the Sierra District.

The regular board meetings of the Sierra Soil and Water Conservation District are held on the second Wednesday of each month at the Chandler Elkins Conference Room, Sierra Conservation Plaza, 2101 S Broadway in Truth or Consequences at 4:00 P.M.

Current Board of Supervisors include:

Willard Hall, Chairman, Palomas Community
Steve Janos, Vice-Chairman, T. or C. Community
Megan Lanford, Member, T. or C. Community
Ronnie Woolf, Member, Engle Community
Randy Lack, Member, Winston Community
Randy Coil, Member, Monticello Community
Beau Marshall, Member, Palomas Community

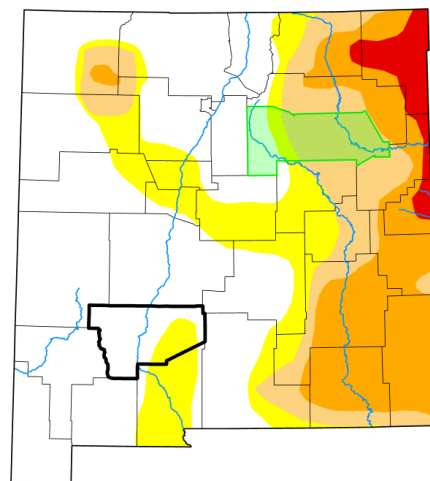
Personnel providing assistance to the Sierra District are:

Jennie Bierner-Shepperd, *Business Manager, full-time*
Taylor Sanchez, *Natural Resource Director, full-time*

This past year has been one of transition for Sierra SWCD. In July the office welcomed Taylor Sanchez, the new Natural Resource Director. In late October, Jennie Bierner-Shepperd (former Supervisor) joined the team as the new Business Manager. The Board of Supervisors appointed former Business Manager, Megan Lanford to the vacant position during their regular December meeting.

Additional technical assistance is provided to the Sierra District by staff of the USDA- Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Truth or Consequences Field Office, which includes Kristi Wright, District Conservationist, Soil Conservationist, Justin Padilla, Morgan Smith, Area CET and Nicole Chavez, Rangeland Management Specialist.

The District continues to see fluctuations in average precipitation mainly in the form of short, intense rain events. The Lookout Mountain site recorded 34.30 inches of precipitation for the year 2022, 196% of the average precipitation. The Truth or Consequences Municipal AP recorded 10.21 inches for 2022, 111% of the average precipitation. That amount of rainfall, coupled with the 2022 Black Fire, caused the District to experience unprecedented flooding and erosion throughout the area. This data, taken from NRCS AgACIS, does not reflect all measurable moisture. The average data from these NOAA sites do not reflect the total amount of moisture seen in the rest of the Sierra Soil and Water Conservation District. According to the US Drought Monitor Map released on May 25, 2023, Sierra County is experiencing mostly no drought to a D0 (abnormally dry).



Map released: Thurs. May 25, 2023

Data valid: May 23, 2023 at 8 a.m. EDT

Intensity

- None
- D0 (Abnormally Dry)
- D1 (Moderate Drought)
- D2 (Severe Drought)
- D3 (Extreme Drought)
- D4 (Exceptional Drought)
- No Data

Authors

United States and Puerto Rico Author(s):
[Brad Rippey](#), U.S. Department of Agriculture
Pacific Islands and Virgin Islands Author(s):
[Rocky Bilotta](#), NOAA/NCEI

With the destruction of the Black Fire in spring of 2022, many producers within the Sierra District suffered significant damages to their operations. An above average surge of monsoonal moisture (while much needed) combined with the effects of the fire to create a perfect storm of catastrophic flooding in the area. Sierra SWCD has worked to partner with landowners and agencies offering assistance, in effort to streamline recovery efforts.

PROGRAMS

Agricultural Cost Share Program

There was a total of 17 applicants for the FY23 District Agricultural Cost-Share program, with projects totaling \$ 143,327.30. The district paid out \$ 56,104.98 directly to producers. Three producers experienced difficulties obtaining materials to complete projects, causing them to defer application to the next FY. Projects included:

- 1 watering facility (dirt tank)
- 2 pumping plants
- 19.8 acres of farmland land leveled
- 1,991 ft of irrigation pipeline
- 9,504 ft of multistrand barbed wire fence



Livestock Fence in Monticello, NM



Irrigation Pipeline in Cuchillo, NM

Practices installed through NRCS EQIP include:

- Brush Management – 194.6 Acres
- Fence – 0 ft
- Livestock Pipeline – 1477.4 ft
- Watering Facilities – 13
- Pumping plant – 5
- Irrigation Land Leveling – 0.4 acres

Grade Stabilization cost-share program

For several years, the Sierra SWCD collaborated with the National Radio Astronomy Observatory (Very Large Array) near Magdalena, NM, with a cost-share program to encourage grade stabilization. The district would utilize recycled railroad ties from the VLA and offer those to landowners at a reduced cost. However, the district was unable to assist landowners with the grade stabilization program in FY22 and FY23 due to covid restrictions that resulted in the lack of available ties.

Residential Drip and Sprinkler Cost-Share Program

The Sierra SWCD continues their cost-share program to encourage homeowners to install a drip irrigation system on existing or newly installed windbreaks or an irrigation system for their yard. The conservation practice will be based on an average cost per foot of the irrigation system, with the District providing 60% of the average cost, not to exceed \$1,000. There was one application for 218ft of residential irrigation dripline, the district paid \$425.10

Household Water Savings Devices Cost-Share Program

This program encourages homeowners to utilize water devices in their homes that are low flow devices or utilize water more efficiently, such as low flow toilets or showerheads and even for water catchments systems. There was one application for a low flow toilet and one for two low flow showerheads.

Conservation Outreach

Youth Sponsorship

One of the major objectives of the Sierra SWCD is conservation education. They conduct and participate in many activities that promote education in natural resources. Since 1991, the Sierra District has assisted the local high school (Hot Springs High) FFA chapter and the local 4-H Chapter with education events and has also sponsored any qualifying land resource teams to the National Finals in Oklahoma City. This year the Sierra County 4H Pasture and Range Team and the Land Judging Team qualified to compete at the national level. The Land Judging Team placed 5th overall, with one member placing 5th high individual.



Sierra county 4H Land Judging Team, National Land & Range Judging Contest, El Rino, Oklahoma

Working with the Hot Springs High School biology teacher, Mark Hedge, the Sierra District again sponsored a team of five students to the New Mexico Envirothon. The Hot Springs High School Scat Cats plan to compete at the State Competition in Albuquerque, NM on July 11th, and then at the Nation Competition in New Brunswick, NJ the 23-17th.



Hot Spring Envirothon Team

Conservation Education

The District worked closely with the Sierra County Cooperative Extension Office in sponsoring the annual Ag Day event at the Sierra County Fairgrounds in Truth or Consequences. Ag Day was presented to all Kinder - 5th grade students in the local school system and had learning stations, showcasing a variety of agriculture related resources and products. This year Ag Day was held Friday April 14, 2023, and hosted over 300 students and community members.



Students learning about safe archery/hunting practices from NM Game & Fish Officers, and proper Cattle Care.

This year the District continued the popular Ag-in-the-Classroom education with students. The focus was on kindergarten through 5th grade. Each grade level had a different key ag-topic they focused on. Kindergarten learned about the different layers of soil. The District worked closely with the Sierra County Cooperative Extension Office in sponsoring the annual Ag Day event at the Sierra County Fairgrounds in Truth or Consequences. Ag Day was presented to all 3-5th grade students in the local school system and had learning stations, showcasing a variety of agriculture related resources and products. This year Ag Day was held Friday April 14, 2023, and hosted over 300 students and community members.

This year the District continued the popular Ag-in-the-Classroom education curriculum with students. The focus was on kindergarten through 5th grade. Each grade level had a different ag-topic. Kindergarten learned about the different layers of soil while making “soil” pudding cups, while 1st grade learned about vermicomposting and had worm bins in the classroom throughout the spring semester. 2nd grade was given mushroom blocks that they grew and then learned how to cook with. Third grade incubated chicken eggs to hatch. Fourth grade learned about Ag by-products, and 5th grade created projects on rangeland management, grazing, native plant species, and wildland fire.

The District hosted its first ever summer camp: Conservation Days, in the summer of 2021 with middle school students. The camp was three days and consisted of field trips throughout the District to different agricultural operations and hands on activities. Some of the highlights were milking cows, making cheese, visiting a peach orchard, learning to pull a calf, and touring the Ladder Ranch. Due to staff change over and other logistical issues, no camp was hosted in 2022. Summer camp is scheduled to continue in July 2023.

Community Awareness

With a mil levy in place, the Sierra SWCD is very cognizant of their accountability to the community and works very hard promoting natural resource awareness. The District set up a display booth at the local county fair and calendars were provided to all the cooperators of the Sierra District.

Copies of the Annual Report and Annual Plan of Work were distributed to conservation partners and local legislators. The Sierra SWCD also has their own web site (www.sierrasoil.org) to help keep local constituents up to date on District projects.

District staff has made presentations to the Sierra County Commission, Rotary organization and other entities regarding the Sierra SWCD programs and soil and water conservation districts in general

Fiscal Administration

The Board takes their fiscal responsibility very seriously and works diligently to ensure that financial procedures are followed closely. Budgets and financial reports are submitted on a timely basis to the Department of Finance & Administration. The Sierra SWCD adheres to the Office of the State Auditor Agreed upon Procedures Tier System for financial reporting. The existing mil levy rate authorization is submitted to the New Mexico Soil and Water Conservation Commission and the local County Treasurers for review and compliance. Professional Services Contracts were completed for necessary technical and fiscal assistance.

District Act Compliance

The District follows the Open Meetings Act and completes an Open Meetings Resolution annually. The Sierra SWCD participates in any pertinent County Planning and Zoning meetings, Sierra County Commission, T or C City Council, and Elephant Butte City Council meetings monthly. District Supervisors and staff attended trainings provided at the New Mexico Association of Conservation Districts (NMACD) annual conference as well as other professional development classes. The Sierra District also attends the Farm Bill local work group with the T or C Field Office of the NRCS.

Current Issues

The Sierra SWCD, during regular meetings, annually reviews their Memorandums of Understanding with the USDI- Bureau of Land Management, Las Cruces Field Office, the T or C Field Office of the NRCS, USDA-Forest Service, Gila National Forest and the USDA-Forest Service, Cibola National Forest.

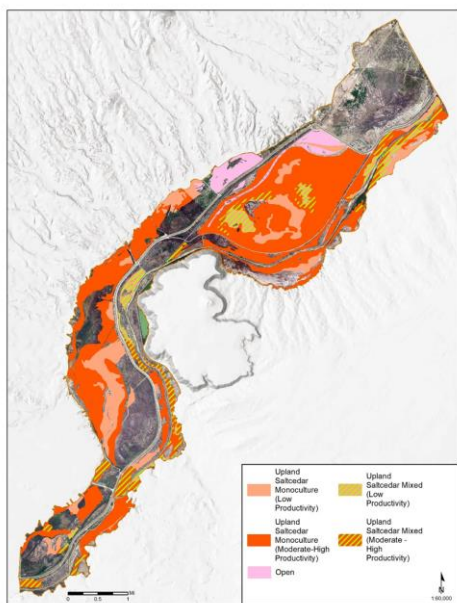
Official comments were provided on many important issues, including Shooting of Feral Cattle on the Gila, the 30 x 30 plan, and proposed BLM Public Lands Rule Change.

Sierra SWCD has also signed a cooperating agency agreement with the Cibola National Forest to participate in revisions to their National Forest Plan and actively participates in planning and public meetings. The district has stayed up to date and active in the development of the Gila National Forest Plan. Comments were submitted by the district and numerous meetings were conducted with the Gila National Forest Supervisor to discuss district issues within the plan.

SPECIAL PROJECTS

Tiffany Fire Rehabilitation Plan

In June of 2017, the Tiffany Fire was ignited by a lightning strike near San Marical, NM. The fire ended up burning 9,200 acres of primarily Tamarisk dominate vegetation. The Sierra SWCD continued to partner with 9 other entities to restore the burned area to the historic, productive state on projects started last year. Sierra SWCD contracted with Tetra Tech Inc. out of Albuquerque to develop the Tiffany Fire Rehabilitation plan that was finalized in FY21. The district continues to work with project partners to aquire implementation funding to continue work within the Tiffany Basin burn scar. Main activities include managing fire-break restoration area where over 300 native, wildlife-friendly shrubs were planted and continuously watered to ensure establishment, as well as management of noxious weeds: salt cedar, pepperweed, and thistle.



Upland Saltcedar Treatment Areas from Tetra Tech.



Fire-Break, shrub planting site, Armendaris Ranch.

Wildlife Guzzler Program

Sierra SWCD was awarded funds through the Soil and Water Conservation Commission to purchase rain catchment systems (wildlife drinkers/guzzlers). The district purchased fifteen 500-gallon and fifteen 1000 gallon polyethylene rain catchment systems, and provided them to 17 landowners to install on private lands throughout the district. Landowners were expected to pick up, install, and maintain drinkers, to receive them at zero cost.



1000-gallon guzzler installed in Engle, NM.



500-gallon guzzler installed in Palomas, NM.

Bureau of Reclamation – Black Willow Pole Harvesting/Planting

Sierra SWCD was contracted by the Bureau of Reclamation to harvest black willow poles from a site near Caballo Lake, and plant them at a restoration site within the Tiffany Fire Burn Scar.

BOR paid SSWCD \$2,500 to harvest 500 viable poles from the extraction site, which required lopping willows at the base of the plant in 3-4ft of standing water, bringing them to dry land, and pruning each branch on the pole. Once harvested and pruned, poles were placed in 5-gallon buckets filled with water to keep them viable until replanting at the restoration site. At the site, BOR drilled holes for 1-2 willow poles to be planted.



Harvesting of Black Willow poles on outskirts of Caballo Lake.

Sierra County Cooperative Weed Management Area

The Sierra District serves as the lead agency on the implementation of the Sierra County Cooperative Weed Management Area (CWMA). This designation will provide for more funding opportunities and allow a broader scope of work. More importantly, a CWMA provides for a more active partnership by detailing responsibilities and action items. The District has been working with such agencies as the Department of Transportation in controlling noxious infestations that start along roadways and encroach on public as well as private lands. Our partnerships also gain funding for such projects as habitat restoration with the Fish and Wildlife Service projects. It will help to open the door with such agencies as the US Forest Service to begin the process of NEPA to allow limited herbicide use near designated areas such as campgrounds where non-native plant species have been introduced. These enhanced relationships are proving to be very beneficial to all party's involved as well as peripheral entities.



African Rue being treated in Elephant Butte, NM.



Cut and stump treatment of Salt Cedar.

The District continues to inventory, map and treat identified noxious plants in Sierra County. The Bureau of Land Management has provided partial funding for a resource management technician, and the BLM continues to provide needed herbicides and equipment to the Sierra SWCD. The SWCD actively works to improve the working relationships with other groups and agencies involved in noxious weed control within the District. Current plants on the inventory include: Camel thorn, African Rue, Russian Knapweed, Salt Cedar, Pepperweed, Tree of Heaven, Wolly locoweed, and Malta Star thistle. The Sierra District has worked very hard with the community, providing technical and on-site assistance for education and removal of noxious weeds. Outreach efforts included on-site treatment at the Monticello Community Cemetery, treatment at the Sierra County Fairgrounds, along the Healing Waters Trail and the Veteran's Memorial Park.

In the ongoing battle against invasive species, treatment has been applied to over 480 acres of weeds, exclusive of salt cedar projects. In the private sector, we have been working hard to assist in the control of several invasive species such as African Rue in the lowland areas and Bull Thistle in some of the mountainous grazing areas.



SSWCD Staff teaching calibration techniques at CEU course.

Outreach and education are key components to a successful weed control program. Informational brochures are distributed throughout the community and informative news articles are provided to local news media. Once again the Sierra SWCD sponsored the annual certified pesticide applicator's CEU course, which provides sufficient training for qualified individuals to continue applying herbicides as public, private or commercial applicators. In addition to that the Sierra District conducts training to interested individuals on preparing to take the NM Department of Agriculture Pesticide applicator's license test.



Monticello Canyon.

THE SIERRA SOIL AND WATER CONSERVATION DISTRICT BOARD OF SUPERVISORS IS VERY PROUD OF THEIR ACCOMPLISHMENTS FOR THE PAST FISCAL YEAR AND HOPES TO CONTINUE MOVING FORWARD.

References

Truth or Consequences Municipal AP Climate Data

<https://agacis.rcc-acis.org/?fips=35051>

Lookout Mountain Climate Data

<https://agacis.rcc-acis.org/?fips=35051>

Drought Data

https://droughtmonitor.unl.edu/CurrentMap/StateDroughtMonitor.aspx?fips_35051

BOR Data- Elephant Butte Lake

<http://www.usbr.gov/rsvrWater/faces/rvrOSMP.xhtml>