

**SIERRA SOIL AND WATER CONSERVATION DISTRICT
ANNUAL REPORT FOR THE PERIOD OF JULY 1, 2020 TO JUNE 30, 2021**



Another beautiful Sierra County sunset

The Board of Supervisors of the Sierra Soil and Water Conservation District continues to grow and expand their District programs and is 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 District Supervisors are:

Willard Hall, Chairman, Palomas Community
Steve Janos, Vice-Chairman, T. or C. Community
Jennie Bierner, 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:

Travis Day, *Natural Resource Director, full-time*
Megan Goyette, *Business Manager, full-time*

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 Jasmine Wilson, District Conservationist, Soil Conservationist Kristi Justice, Matt Mauzy, Area Conservation Technician, and Mitchel Nutter, Range Conservationist, and Travis Swift, Soil Conservation Technician.

Ranchers in the Sierra District saw cattle prices increase this year, with steers (400–500#) selling 3.00-5.00 higher with heifers (400–500#) 5.00 higher. Hay prices are around the same as last year with 2 stand bales of alfalfa bringing an average of \$7.00 to \$8.00 and one-ton bales were going from \$180-\$200/ton.

The District continues to see fluctuations in average precipitation this past winter based on the two USDA- NRCS *SNOTEL* sites located in the district. The Lookout Mountain site recorded precipitation levels a little over 4.5 inches from October of 2020 to June, 2021, an average of 72% of normal. The *SNOTEL* site at McKnight continued to show an increase in moisture levels this year with precipitation totals of 6 inches and an average precipitation amount of 44% of normal for the same time period. These totals reflect all measurable moisture-both snow and rain. The average data from these *SNOTEL* sites do not reflect the total amount of moisture seen in the rest of the Sierra Soil and Water Conservation District. According to the June 2021 US Drought Monitor, Sierra SWCD continues suffering under drought conditions with this year reflecting an abnormally dry year, an improvement of last year's moderate drought levels. With below average wide spread monsoon rainfall through the year, there has been little opportunity for native plants to thrive. Small

forage levels were all wildlife and livestock had to carry them through, with the exception for supplemental feeding by agriculture producers.

PROGRAMS

Agricultural Cost Share Program

There was a total of eleven applicants for the FY19 District Agricultural Cost-Share program, with projects totaling \$199,114.58. The district paid out \$ 81,320.99 directly to producers. Projects included:

- 8,910 ft of livestock pipeline
- 5 watering facilities
- 2 pumping plant
- 82 acres of farmland land leveled
- 5,011 ft of irrigation pipeline
- 4,503 ft of multistrand barbed wire fence



Multistrand Fence installed in Las Palomas canyon



Solar pumping plant installed in Monticello, NM

Practices installed through NRCS EQIP include:

183.4 acres of brush management
31,076 feet of livestock fence
33,489 feet of livestock pipeline
27 watering facilities
5 Pumping plants
21.8 acres of land leveled

1,906 feet of concrete lined ditch
66 acres of prescribed fire

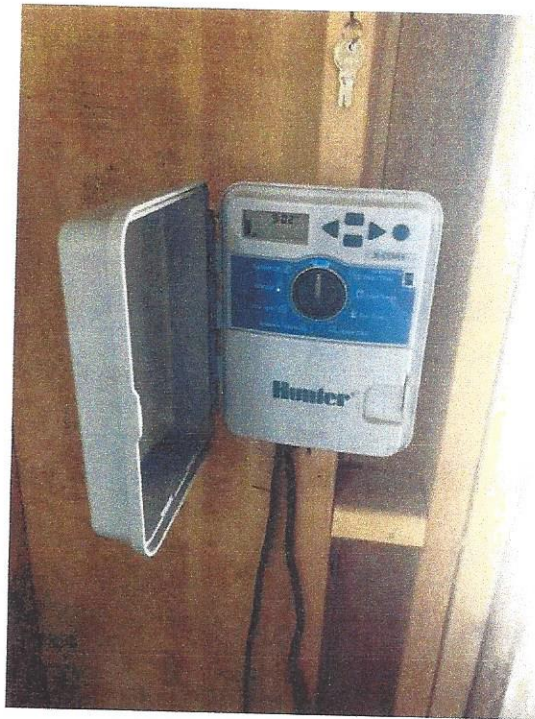
Grade Stabilization cost-share program

Working collaboratively with the National Radio Astronomy Observatory (Very Large Array) near Magdalena, NM, the Sierra SWCD continued with a cost-share program to encourage grade stabilization. The District is able to utilize recycled railroad ties from the VLA and offer those to landowners. Landowners must show a need for stabilization work and have a need for more than 25 railroad ties. The district was unable to assist landowners with the grade stabilization program in FY21 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 a total of two applicants approved for the FY20 Residential Drip and Sprinkler Program. \$3,000.00 was paid directly to stakeholders who installed 1624 ft of drip irrigation pipe and sprinkler irrigation pipe.



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 a total of 5 low flow toilets and 2 instant hot water heaters installed in FY21. A total of \$509.90 was paid directly to district stakeholders for installation of practices.



Low flow toilet installed

Conservation Outreach

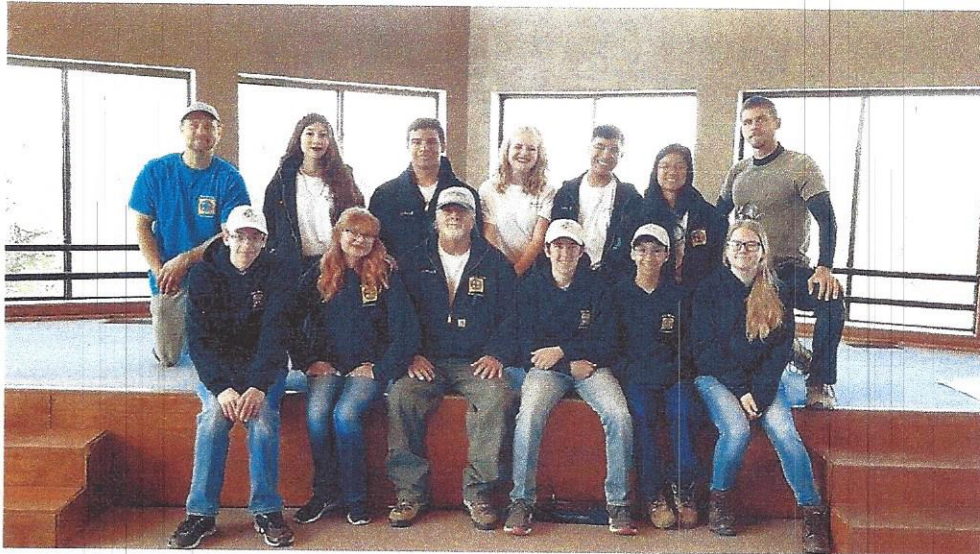
Youth Sponsorship

One of the major objectives of the Sierra SWCD is conservation education. They conduct or 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, along with the Hot Springs High School FFA Pasture and Range Team qualified to compete at the national level.



Sierra SWCD board members with FFA & 4H teams

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 are the state champions at the New Mexico Envirothon Contest virtual competition and this is the eighth time in a row this great group of kids has accomplished this endeavor. Due to Covid-19 this year the International Envirothon contest location and details are unknown.



Hot Spring Envirothon Team

Conservation Education

The District worked closely with the Sierra County Cooperative Extension Office in sponsoring the annual Ag Day at the Sierra County Fairgrounds in Truth or Consequences. Unfortunately, due to covid-19 restrictions Ag Day 2020 was cancelled.

Sierra SWCD's outreach education program was halted in FY21 due to school closures and COVID-19 restrictions.

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.

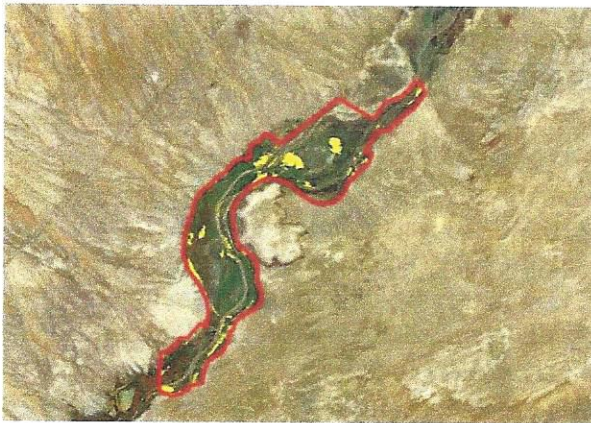
Official comments were provided on many important issues, including the Cibola Forest Plan Revision, Gila Forest Plan Revision, Forest Service allotment plans, New Mexico Department of Game and Fish Trapping regulations and the Mexican Grey Wolf 10(j) rules.

The Sierra District supervisors and staff attended trainings on completing a Land Use Plan. They have subsequently adopted an Interim Land Use Plan and are currently working on updating the plan to encompass more current issues and concerns. 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 partnered with 9 other entities to restore the burned area to the historic, productive state. Sierra SWCD applied for and received water trust board funds for the planning, compliance and site preparation portions of the project. Sierra SWCD contracted with Tetra Tech Inc. out of Albuquerque to develop the Tiffany Fire Rehabilitation plan that was finalized in FY21.



Salt Cedar Removal Projects

Sierra SWCD also through a contract with Turner Foundation was able to foliar treat 100 acres on the Armendariz Ranch.



Mim's Pond Restoration Phase I

The Mims's Lake Fire began on July 18, 2020. Fuels primarily consisted of *Tamarix spp.* (Salt Cedar), *Elaeagnus angustifolia* (Russian Olive), numerous grass and brush species. Sierra SWCD met with stakeholders to discuss restoration efforts to prevent future fire events, reestablish native vegetation, improve aesthetics in the area. Staff reached out to all landowners and received feedback from three of the four landowners, Mi Encanta LLC, Turtleback Mountain Development, and the City of Elephant Butte. Sierra SWCD will continue to reach out to the fourth landowner in later phases. Phase I of Mim's Pond restoration includes 39.5 acres of non-native phreatophyte removal and replanting in 3 of the 4 project areas



Mim's Pond Phase I Restoration project area A1 prior to removal.



Mim's Pond Phase I Restoration project area A1 after removal.

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.

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, 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.



African Rue being treated

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.

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.

HEALING WATERS TRAIL

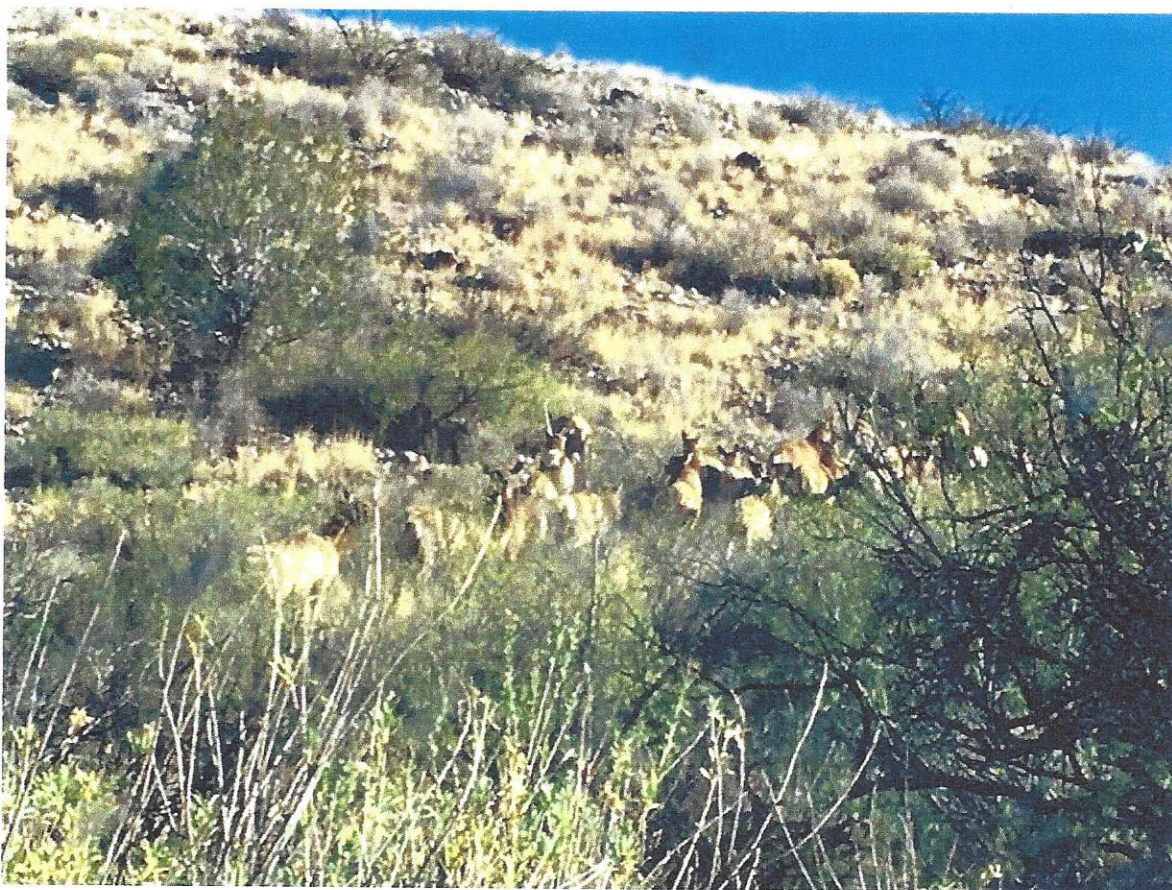


Map of Healing Waters Trail

During the development of the Rio Grande Corridor Enhancement and Economic Development Plan, a number of projects were adopted and several of them were very similar. Early in 2005, the Jornada Resource Conservation & Development Council, Inc. (RC&D) conducted an information gathering meeting with various organizations and entities regarding those ideas and the result was the concept of the Healing Waters Trail. The trail would highlight those ideas, which included a focus on the mineral baths, fishing and access for handicap fishing, birding and walking. A community based planning effort began in the summer of 2007 when the City of Truth or Consequences and the Sierra Soil and Water Conservation District submitted a request to the National Park Service for technical assistance in trail planning through the Rivers, Trails & Conservation Assistance (RTCA) Program to help the community focus on the Healing Waters Trail. RTCA is a federal technical assistance program that provides support for community-based trails and conservation-based projects throughout the country. Staff provided would facilitate the development of the trail and focus on community involvement in the planning process.

After the initial meeting in January of 2008, a steering committee was organized to represent the three different segments of the trail: the historic hot springs district, the wetlands, and Carrie Tingley Hill. Membership in the steering committee is very diverse, representing all walks of life: fishermen, hot springs owners, veterans, governmental entities, civic organizations, youth organizations, Main Street Truth or Consequences and the Sierra Club.

The Healing Waters Trail represents the collective effort of local citizens, local businesses and organizations and the City of Truth or Consequences to create a three (3) mile walking trail in the City. The trail will connect the Historic Hot Springs District to the Rotary Park and wetlands along the Rio Grande and then travels over Carrie Tingley Hill, connecting with Veterans Memorial Park and finally looping back to Geronimo Springs Museum along South Broadway and Main Street. The City of Truth or Consequences, with assistance of the Sierra SWCD, applied for a Recreational Trails Program grant through NM State Parks that would provide funding for signage along the trail, benches, shade structures, trash bins and interpretive panels. The grant was awarded in the amount of \$93,844 and the grant was completed in June of 2013. Many trail amenities were purchased such as directional signs were purchased and installed at key areas along that portion of the trail that goes through the downtown area. Markings, utilizing the trail logo, were placed intermittently on city sidewalks to help walkers confirm they were traveling along the Healing Waters Trail.



Elk in 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

Cattle Prices

<https://www.ams.usda.gov/mnreports/lswmexicobcwr.pdf>

Lookeout Mountain Data

http://wcc.sc.egov.usda.gov/reportGenerator/view/customChartReport/daily/595:NM:SNTL%7cid=%22%22%7cname/CurrentWY,CurrentWYEnd/WTEQ::value,WTEQ::median_1981,PREC::value,PREC::average_1981?fitToScreen=false

McKnight Cabin Data

http://wcc.sc.egov.usda.gov/reportGenerator/view/customChartReport/daily/1048:NM:SNTL%7cid=%22%22%7cname/CurrentWY,CurrentWYEnd/WTEQ::value,WTEQ::median_1981,PREC::value,PREC::average_1981?fitToScreen=false

Drought Data

<http://www.srh.noaa.gov/abq/?n=drought#Wateryear>

BOR Data- Elephant Butte Lake

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