

Celebration of a positive future for New Mexico

Written by By Reyaun Francisco President Iyanbito Chapter Community Land Use Planning Committee Associate
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Friday, 07 January 2022 05:04



As 2021 comes to an end, I want to take a moment to celebrate something very positive and encouraging. At the end of December, the New Mexico state legislature passed a bill to make historic investments in our environment and public lands. Now, more than \$40 million is on its way to pay for important land and water conservation projects to upgrade our state parks, support water conservation, get our youth outside, and clean up orphaned oil and gas wells.

Many elected officials deserve credit for prioritizing this funding, but I especially want to thank Rep. Patty Lundstrom, [D-Gallup] who represents our area. Without her leadership as chairwoman of the House Appropriations & Finance Committee, and the support of so many committee members and staff, this funding would not be possible. Legislators are faced with many different options and requests for funding, and fortunately Rep. Lundstrom understands the value that conservation brings us. In that spirit, I want to share three reasons this funding will help:

First, our environment: With hotter and drier seasons, extreme temperatures, wildfires, and flooding, New Mexico's entire ecosystem is being stretched thin. This funding will help restore the health of our lands and watersheds by supporting vital river stewardship and surface water protection projects. There is also funding to jumpstart the long overdue work of cleaning up orphaned oil and gas well sites. These sites have left behind a toxic legacy of pollution that poisons our air, land, and water; this funding is a long overdue act that shows respect for the long-term health of our environment and marginalized communities as we transition away from fossil fuel extraction.

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Second, our economy: New Mexico's outdoor recreation economy is a game changer for our state. During the pandemic, New Mexicans flocked to our state parks, only to find them understaffed and under-resourced due to budget cuts left over from the previous administration. This funding will support an industry that creates jobs in rural communities and diversifies our economy. Almost half of this new funding will go towards draining a backlog of maintenance projects for the State Parks Division, which include places like Bluewater Lake State Park. This injection of new funding will go a long way to wiping out the backlog, giving more New Mexicans the quality recreational opportunities they expect and deserve while creating jobs in every corner of the state.

Third, education: As someone born and raised in a single-low income household on the Navajo reservation, I'm especially proud that more attention is being put towards getting more young New Mexicans outside to explore their public lands. Thanks to the support of the Outdoor Recreation Division's Outdoor Equity Fund, tens of thousands of young people are re-connecting with nature and discovering places in their backyards they may have never visited due to a lack of opportunity and organization. Funding has already supported several local organizations like Big Brothers Big Sisters and initiatives from the Zuni Youth Enrichment Project, Native American Community Academy, and National Indian Youth Leadership Project. From upgrading existing areas like the Pyramid Rock Trail at Red Rock Park, funding the successful Silver Stallion bike repair van that provides transportation options to kids in rural communities, to providing new outdoor classroom opportunities at Hózhó Academy, our area continues to benefit tremendously from funding that is dedicated to more equitable access to the outdoors.

New Mexicans should be proud of this new funding, but they should also know it's only the beginning. I consider this a down payment on our future, and the first step in a movement to ensure land and water conservation remains a priority each legislative session and well into the future. There is often too much fighting in politics with too little energy spent on what actually helps people. Not in New Mexico.

Our leaders across the state are showing that we can meet the challenges we face with smart policies, Axhe'hee Ntsaago, Thank you greatly!

By Reyaun Francisco
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