



Strategic Conservation Plan Synopsis

Our Mission:

Santa Fe Conservation Trust (SFCT) partners with our community to keep northern New Mexico's living lands and people flourishing together. We protect culturally and environmentally significant landscapes, ignite people's passion for nature and enable the continual regeneration of our healthy place.

Our Vision:

We envision a future where everyone in northern New Mexico cherishes nature and works to preserve it for this and future generations.

A Nationally Accredited Land Trust:

SFCT is a nationally accredited land trust. Accreditation by the Land Trust Alliance verifies that we are a fiscally sustainable organization able to enforce our conservation easements in perpetuity, and that we have strong, up-to-date policies and procedures in place that guide our work with the highest legal and ethical standards. The Strategic Conservation Plan builds on this strength and focuses on land conservation strategies that will provide the greatest public benefit over the next ten years.

Executive Summary:

Northern New Mexico is a profoundly beautiful and unique landscape. Mountains, mesas, river corridors and plains surround us and define our sense of place. These lands and waterways have sustained us for centuries, providing essential food and resources as well as access to a multitude of outdoor experiences that inspire us and elevate our physical and mental wellbeing.

Since its founding in 1993, the Santa Fe Conservation Trust (SFCT) has focused on protecting this exceptional landscape through conservation easements that safeguard these resources in perpetuity. With over 45,000 acres already protected, the SFCT, in partnership with private landowners, has made a powerful impact by protecting scenic views, open space, cultural

resources, working lands, and recreational access on northern New Mexico's most iconic landscapes.

Changes to northern New Mexico over the coming decades due to population growth and climate change are inevitable, so it is paramount that land protection efforts be strong and strategic to defend the health and integrity of this region. This document is an overview of a plan designed to focus our land protection activities for the next decade, to ensure that our efforts protect critical and vulnerable resources and have the greatest impact and public benefit moving forward.

Purpose and Need:

In an area blessed with spectacular scenic views, significant cultural resources, abundant wildlife and accessible outdoor recreation, the increasing threats to our region may go unnoticed. But in time the fragmentation that occurs as large tracts of open range, forest and agricultural lands are subdivided and developed create serious and permanent impacts.

SFCT has been in the enviable position of protecting land by putting in place conservation easements donated by generous and conservation-minded landowners. For more than 25 years, this model of landowners donating development rights has been very successful in protecting scenic views and open space, wildlife habitat, cultural resources and public recreation for the benefit of all of us and future generations. The State of New Mexico and the federal government reward landowners for doing so with tax benefits, but this model is not the only tool that land trusts can use to protect land. Not all landowners can afford to donate their development rights, even with the current income tax incentives. And there are many properties worthy of protection where landowners are struggling to pay property taxes and retain ownership of their lands.

SFCT's Strategic Conservation Plan (SCP) will guide the organization for the next ten years in its conservation work. It proposes focusing on areas with high conservation values where many of our existing conservation easements are clustered and working with surrounding landowners and other conservation groups to create larger, "landscape" sized conservation areas.

Larger, connected areas of conserved land will make our communities more resilient to climate change. Landscape scale conservation will protect and expand migration corridors, create buffer zones in areas of high development, tie water rights to the land, offer more opportunities to expand and create trails for public access, and expand/connect SFCT's patchwork of existing protected areas, providing greater conservation benefits to the public.

Why does the SCP focus on connectivity and landscape-scale conservation? Because biodiversity is the foundation for human health, and habitat fragmentation is thought to be the largest threat to biodiversity. Human populations cannot exist without a global environment that is healthy and capable of supporting a diversity of life. Little by little, as small populations of wildlife or plants become isolated from all other populations of the same species, they risk

inbreeding and local extinction. Genetic diversity promotes resistance and resilience to environmental stresses including pests and disease of crops and livestock. The cost of replacing these (if possible) would be extremely expensive. It therefore makes economic and development sense to protect the biodiversity of northern New Mexico.

The proposed SCP is ambitious, but it is the right thing to do, because the successful implementation of it allows the equitable inclusion of a wider diversity of landowners in our work. It also means that SFCT will need to expand its business model to include buying all or some of a landowner's development rights, helping landowners cover the transaction cost of CEs, and, if need be, purchasing lands of high conservation value.

Guiding Principles and Priorities:

Since its founding in 1993, SFCT has focused on conservation work in Rio Arriba, Santa Fe and San Miguel Counties in northern New Mexico, protecting more than 45,000 acres with 98 conservation easements. Over time, as landowners donated conservation easements, clusters of conserved land developed in seven focal areas. The SCP recommends a pro-active conservation emphasis in the following focal areas:

1. **The Santa Fe/Tesuque Area** – an area with great development pressures along with increasing usage of trails and open space.
2. **The Galisteo Basin Watershed** – growing residential development and mining interests threaten important wildlife corridors, cultural resources and public access for outdoor recreation.
3. **Pecos River Valley** – threatened by energy development, mining and the loss of working lands, this critical water corridor provides essential wildlife habitat.

These focal areas already consist of clustered conservation easements that are variable in size, conservation values, biological diversity, cultural landscape, and public education and outdoor recreation offerings. The smallest conservation easement is less than three acres, but it protects an important reach of the Santa Fe River canyon. Other conservation easements in the foothills from Tesuque to Pecos protect a viewshed that impacts all residents of Santa Fe and surrounding areas with recreational opportunities to connect urban areas to the national forest.

Contiguous conservation easements in the Galisteo Basin Watershed protect view sheds, wildlife habitat and corridors, and literally thousands of historically important landscapes and sites. These lower elevation lands also provide unmatched trail recreation opportunities that markedly improve the quality of life of Santa Fe County residents.

Conservation easements along the Pecos River protect riparian habitats, wild canyons, and upland grass lands and wood lands. Large conservation easements in the Piedra Lumbre and Las Vegas Watershed preserve historic structures and trail ruts, view sheds, and vast open space grass lands.

Building on large contiguous easements will increase the effectiveness of wildlife habitat preservation, species diversity and longevity, unspoiled view lines, and protection of working lands. Connecting parcels in areas with high public use will promote trail expansion, connectivity, and ensure perpetual community health and quality of life benefits.

SFCT prioritizes working on four categories of land:

- A. *Lands that offer scenic and recreational continuity*: focus on (1) areas directly connected to a local or regional trail network, (2) areas with striking scenic features (“view sheds”), (3) areas with great night sky opportunities; (5) navigable stretches of rivers important for public education and recreation, and (4) areas that contribute to fishing and hunting opportunities throughout a focal area
- B. *Working lands/farms*: focus on (1) water source areas; (2) agricultural areas close to markets (economically viable agricultural areas); (3) prime agricultural land threatened by (ex)urban development, lack of successors on the farms, and other threats that might lead to loss of the working lands
- C. *Cultural resource areas*: focus on (1) areas important to traditional communities for their wildlife, plant, geologic, sacred or spiritual values, (2) areas that preserve cultural landscape structure including archaeological and historical sites important to understanding local and regional culture histories, and (3) areas of known importance for cultural resource protection
- D. *Wildlife habitat and lands of critical value from the perspective of conservation biology*: focus on (1) “keystone” areas, such as wetlands, riparian zones, water infiltration areas, and core habitat areas; (2) creating landscape connectivity for wildlife movement; (3) preserving size and the breadth of wildlife habitat; (4) watershed protection and preserving water sources across the land; (5) preserving contiguous areas of protected land in combination with other public or private lands; (6) preserving habitat of keystone species and species of the greatest conservation need as per the State wildlife conservation plan, and (7) areas that function as buffer zones for critical landscapes that are threatened by severe natural or human-induced degradation.

Another guiding principle is a commitment to expanding SFCT’s business model to include a wider diversity of landowners in the implementation of the SCP:

Conservation easements can be complex, requiring considerable research, documentation, legal oversight and financial investment. SFCT has traditionally benefitted from landowners donating the development rights of their land and covering the easement expenses in return for considerable state and federal tax benefits. Yet, many landowners struggle to hold onto land that has been in their family for generations, to preserve their traditional way of life and the hope of passing the land on to their heirs. Conserving their land is often not financially possible in these circumstances. SFCT is committed to expanding its business model by raising considerable funds to assist with or fully cover easement transaction costs, purchase conservation easements, and if needed, purchase lands in targeted priority areas.

SFCT has already accomplished several steps in the implementation of the SCP:

- Through stakeholder meetings, identified strategic alignments with other conservation groups and governmental entities to maximize conservation impact in the focal areas.
- Contracted for GIS support to analyze and evaluate the focal areas with GIS tools, ecological models, and land use projections to determine which areas should be targeted for conservation.
- Expanded its Land Program staff to include a project manager for the SCP
- Established procedures for assisting conservation easement donors with transaction costs.
- Acquired the Conservation Homestead property in the Galisteo Basin, which is serving as a local example of habitat restoration, land protection, and accessible trail development.

In the coming years, SFCT will:

- Focus on outreach to landowners and developers of parcels adjacent to existing easements in an effort to cluster and expand conserved lands.
- Work with current easement holders to explore amending their easements by placing more acreage under conservation.
- Use the GIS analysis to identify landowners SFCT can proactively target with outreach.
- Implement strategic outreach materials based on the SCP.
- Initiate or work with others on legislative efforts to support the SCP and its objectives.
- Expand capacity for annual monitoring of conservation easements.
- Phase the implementation of the plan as SFCT builds organizational capacity and raise sufficient funds enabling the purchase of easements and threatened critical lands.

Join Us:

Thanks to the support of many, the SFCT is the established leader of land conservation in this region. With the Strategic Conservation Plan we strive to reinforce our core mission by proactively expanding conserved areas while building strong relationships with landowners, partners and the community. We invite you to join in these efforts:

- Volunteer, Share your Ideas, Join a Committee
- Become a Sustaining Donor
- Consider Protecting your Land
- Include SFCT in your Will or Estate Plans

Together we will protect northern New Mexico's living lands for the benefit of all.