

# Testimony for Debra Hughes

*Executive Director, New Mexico Association of Conservation Districts*

House Natural Resources Committee  
Subcommittee on Public Lands and Environmental Regulations  
Oversight Hearing on Invasive Species Management on Federal Lands

1334 Longworth House Office Building  
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Chairman Bishop, Ranking Member Grijalva, members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I am Debra Hughes, Executive Director of the New Mexico Association of Conservation Districts. In addition to serving as NMACD's executive director, my husband and I operate Hughes Brothers Ranch & Hunting business in the Guadalupe Mountains near Carlsbad, NM. We have installed best management practices on our land for the past 40 years.

NMACD is a non-profit association whose members include the 47 New Mexico Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCD's). NMACD provides support to the local SWCD's on state and national issues, and works with the New Mexico Legislature, Congressional Delegations, and related governmental agencies. Conservation districts in New Mexico and nationwide are focused on empowering those at the local level to determine what is best for the natural resource concerns in a specific area. It is our belief that the local leadership has the best understanding and can have the greatest impact with the least expense. *Soil and Water Districts are the "only governmental agency" that has the ability to work on private, state, federal and tribal lands through agreements and our statutory authority!*

New Mexico is the Land of Enchantment with diverse ownership and uses. Forty percent of our land is owned by the federal government—predominately by U.S. Forest Service (USFS) at 20 percent and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) at 17 percent; 17 percent is owned by the state; ten percent by the tribes; and 33 percent by private landowners, but most ranches in the West include ownership and management of private, state and federal land. NM land uses include ranching and agriculture, oil and gas, and recreation, to name a few. We have diverse wildlife habitat from deserts to mountains; home to deer and elk and much more, including several prominent candidate species such as the Dune Sage Lizard and the Lesser Prairie Chicken.

Conservation districts are very concerned with the health of our state's beautiful landscape. Conservation districts work on threatened and endangered species, insect and disease concerns, wildfire prevention and rehabilitation, drought and water concerns, and, of course, invasive species. Since 2005, NMACD, along with federal, state, private partners, and fellow non-governmental organizations have worked to create *Restore New Mexico*.

Restore New Mexico is an aggressive partnership to restore woodlands, grasslands, and riparian areas to a healthy and productive condition. In the west, as many of you are aware, the fragmentation of the landscape due to checkerboard land ownership and jurisdiction makes landscape level restoration efforts difficult. Restore New Mexico works to overcome those boundaries and have a positive impact on the land on a landscape level, regardless of ownership—federal, state, tribal, or private. We strive to

be “colorblind” when it comes to land restoration efforts and treatments across multiple jurisdictions and ownerships.

Restore New Mexico represents a broad partnership—the key players include NMACD, BLM, and Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), along with the NM Dept. of Game and Fish, and the NM State University Jornada Experimental Range. Both BLM and NRCS have matching visions for improving the health of the land, lending significant strength and credibility to the success of Restore New Mexico. Furthermore, Restore New Mexico works with the local land managers—conservation districts supervisors, BLM field staff, NRCS conservationists, and state officials to determine the most pressing projects and the best applications to accomplish those goals. This locally led process has enabled great success.

Since the program’s inception, more than 2.1 million acres of impaired habitat have been treated, starting the transition to healthy ecological states. This expansive restoration effort has been possible due to the strong relationship between the BLM and NMACD. NMACD has a Cooperative Agreement with BLM, enabling us, the conservation districts, to serve as the contracting agent for over \$14.4 million in BLM dollars to distribute on the ground. Since 2008, BLM’s contributions to Restore New Mexico have made up between 12 and 19 percent of the overall habitat treatments conducted by the BLM nationwide. Additionally, NRCS has made over \$11 million available for conservation projects. The resources provided by BLM and NRCS, coupled with \$17.8 million from other partners, have enabled Restore New Mexico to thrive to the successes we have seen today.

The part I am most proud of is that while treating over two million acres, we function at a very high efficiency level. Restore New Mexico places over 93 percent of the dollars on the ground for treatment. This is possible given that there is only a small overhead needed to administer the program. We also believe landscape level restoration is efficient because of economies of scale; treating more acres per project lowers the cost per acre of treatments.

Thanks to our partners and relationships throughout the state, we have been able to monitor results on grasslands, thanks to the Jornada Experiment Station; soil moisture, thanks to the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation; conduct forest inventories, thanks to New Mexico Highlands University; photos for all treatment sites, post-monitoring to rereading the initial plots, and other post-treatment monitoring as necessary, all thanks to the BLM.

On a local conservation district level, ten conservation districts have financial assistance agreements with the BLM for noxious and invasive weed treatments and weed education programs. The conservation districts include Otero, Socorro, San Juan, Upper Hondo, East Rio Arriba, Sierra, East Torrance, Cuba, Carlsbad, and Chaves.

Specific projects Restore New Mexico has been responsible for include Salt Cedar restoration work along the Delaware River, Creosote Restoration in Last Chance Canyon, Sagebrush and Juniper treatment south of Cuba, NM, reclamation of the Sulimar Oil Field, Henery Tank Mesquite treatments, and Sagebrush shaving adjacent to the Taos Field Office. These are just a few of the examples of the capabilities of Restore New Mexico and the significant impact that is capable of local land management.

Chairman Bishop, Ranking Member Grijalva, thank you again for the opportunity to present the successes we have had in New Mexico locally managing natural resources concerns, including invasive species. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.