

**Statement of
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Bureau of Land Management
Senate Energy & Natural Resources Committee
Subcommittee on Public Lands & Forests
S. 1940, Rio Puerco Watershed Management Program Reauthorization Act
On
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Thank you for the opportunity to testify on S.1940, the Rio Puerco Watershed Management Program Reauthorization Act. The legislation provides a 10-year reauthorization for the Rio Puerco Management Committee (RPMC), a collaborative watershed organization established by Section 401 of the Omnibus Parks and Public Lands Management Act of 1996 (P.L. 104-333). Through the collaborative processes of the RPMC, the BLM has partnered with Federal, state, and Tribal governments, private individuals, and environmental organizations, to improve management practices and protect the long-term sustainability of the watershed. The legislation also adds the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) as a member of the RPMC, formalizing the cooperative role it has played in these efforts. The BLM strongly supports enactment of S.1940.

The Rio Puerco Watershed, located in west-central New Mexico, contributes less than 10 percent of the water, but nearly 70 percent of the silt, to the Rio Grande north of the Elephant Butte Reservoir. According to the Corps of Engineers, soil erosion within the basin surpasses that of any other watershed in the country. The New Mexico Environment Department has classified the Rio Puerco as a Category I impaired watershed, primarily because of the high levels of sedimentation.

RPMC Accomplishments

The RPMC has effectively built on initiatives begun by a locally led public-private stakeholders group based in Cuba, New Mexico. The RPMC is a collaborative watershed organization consisting of state, Federal, and Tribal entities, soil and water conservation districts, representatives of county government, residents from the rural communities within the watershed, environmental and conservation groups and the public. It is a consensus group charged with compiling data and developing best management practices to reduce erosion, increase native vegetation, and improve riparian habitat while supporting the watershed's rural, agrarian, and cultural traditions.

The RPMC and its partners received grants and awards, in part based on the diversity of entities participating and on its track record in showcasing how the watershed approach can yield measurable success. The EPA Administrator identified the RPMC as one of the winners of the 2003 Watershed Initiative grants, with an award of \$700,000. The Rio Puerco Alliance, a 501(c)3 non-profit organization formed in 2006, received a grant of \$840,000 in August 2007 for the Targeted Watershed Restoration Initiative in Torreon Wash. Projects on which the RPMC

have worked collaboratively have received 319 grants from the [New Mexico Environment Department](#) and the [EPA's Watershed Initiative Program](#).

Among its accomplishments, the RPMC has:

- launched a community involvement initiative that started with listening sessions held in local communities and developed into a series of training and demonstration workshops on conservation practices;
- developed a Watershed Restoration Action Strategy, to address specific water quality problems.

In cooperation with the New Mexico State Highway and Transportation Department, the RPMC is redirecting the Rio Puerco from an unstable artificial 1.1 mile channel to its natural 2.2 miles of meandering channel. This project is funded through a New Mexico Environment Department Clean Water Act grant and through assistance from Sandoval County and the New Mexico Highway and Transportation Department. This project will reduce approximately 21 tons of sediment that have been lost annually since the river was diverted.

Through another New Mexico Environment Department Clean Water Act grant, the RPMC worked with private landowners in two degraded tributaries to the Rio Puerco to create a showcase water quality improvement project through erosion control, livestock grazing management, and control of undesirable vegetation.

The 1996 Act that created the RPMC authorized \$7.5 million over 10 years. The authority expired on November 12, 2006. Prior to its expiration, the RPMC used this funding to leverage grants for resource protection and has accepted in-kind contributions for on-the-ground project work.

Navajo Youth Projects

In 2007, the BLM, the Navajo Water Resources Department and the State of New Mexico provided funding for on-the-ground Navajo Youth Projects in six Chapters of the Eastern Navajo Agency. Through this collaborative effort, six youth Projects have hired about 100 Navajo youth to construct erosion control structures on Tribal, BLM, and state lands within grazing allotments held by the Navajo Nation. The program also included environmental education training on the concepts of watershed management. Several leaders of the Navajo Nation have expressed their conviction that Navajo youth need this important tie back to the land.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify on S.1940. The collaborative nature of the Rio Puerco Management Committee has resulted in successful implementation of activities to restore and protect the watershed, and the BLM looks forward to continuing this important work. I would be glad to answer your questions.