



El Malpais National Conservation Area  
Bureau of Land Management  
**FY 2011 Manager's Report**

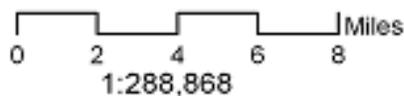
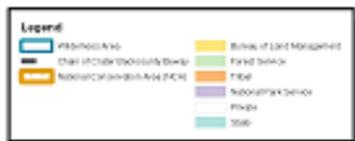
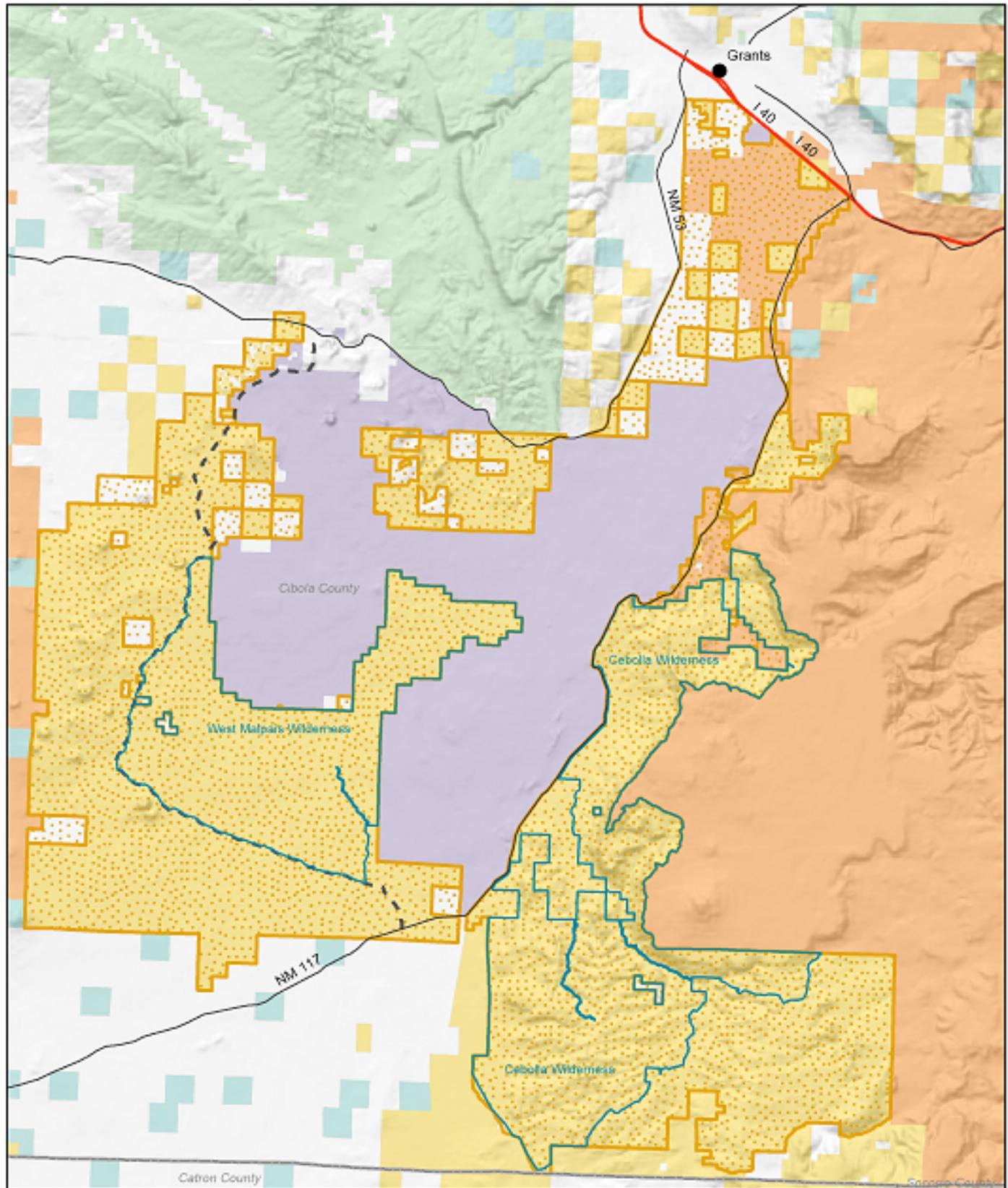


Bureau of Land Management  
National Landscape Conservation System

## El Malpais National Conservation Area FY 2011 Manager's Report

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505-280-2918
- Established: Public Law 100-225, December 31, 1987
- Acreage: 227,100 BLM acres
- Estimated Annual Visitation: 52,578

# El Malpais National Conservation Area



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## SECTION 1 – NATURAL AND HERITAGE RESOURCE CONDITIONS

### Natural Resource Trends

- Efforts continue to document avian populations in the El Malpais National Conservation Area (NCA). The current species list stands at 217. Of this total, 106 species have been documented in the Cebolla Canyon riparian restoration area. A Zone-tailed hawk was recorded this year.
- Prior to acquisition by the BLM, land practices led to a serious decline in the riparian conditions of the land. The NCA is committed to restoring all riparian ecosystems to Proper Functioning Condition and is continuing to plan and implement projects aimed toward the rehabilitation of Cebolla Spring.
- In FY 2011, 797 prairie dogs were relocated to the area. Continued population enhancement efforts are targeted toward facilitating the growth and expansion of the current prairie dog population to eventually reach a level appropriate for reintroduction of the black-footed ferret.

### Heritage Resource Trends

- Using the most recent New Mexico Cultural Resource Information System data provided by the State Office in April 2010, plus the acres of inventory that has been completed since that date, the total area inventoried at a Class III level is 7,184 acres. Class II coverage includes an additional 6,830 acres of transects walked covering an area of approximately 68,300 acres. The percent of the area ever inventoried for cultural resources at either a Class II or Class III level is approximately 33.2% (75,484 acres). The percentage of Class III coverage is 6.1%.

### Site Stewardship Programs

- New Mexico Site Stewards volunteers monitor two individual sites, the Dittert Site and the Skull Site, quarterly. Two additional volunteer Site Stewards monitor the Prehistoric Cebolla Canyon Community, which is a 320-acre area containing 52 sites.
- The Rio Puerco Field Office has a formal partnership with the University of Arizona Laboratory Of Tree Ring Research to conduct tree ring, repeat photography, and archival and oral history studies within the NCA.
- Volunteer rock art recording groups, and individuals, have done detailed documentation of known concentrations of petroglyphs within the NCA.



- Volunteers with expertise in historical archaeology have carried out detailed documentation of historic homesteads within the NCA. For resource protection purposes, the BLM has stabilized and fenced many of these sites.

## Wilderness

- The BLM continues to monitor wilderness areas and wilderness study areas, including increased patrolling during hunting season to attempt to reduce illegal vehicle intrusions. The BLM put up additional signs to delineate wilderness boundaries. Signs were posted on areas where fresh vehicle tracks were seen going into the wilderness areas and the tracks were raked out.

## Rangeland Health Assessment

- The BLM completed a 10,000-acre juniper treatment to restore native grasslands in the area.

## Restoration

- In an effort to enhance prairie dog populations in the NCA, the BLM Rio Puerco Field Office, in conjunction with the City of Santa Fe, has relocated 797 prairie dogs. Continued population enhancement efforts are targeted toward facilitating the growth and expansion of the current prairie dog population to eventually reach a level appropriate for reintroduction of the black-footed ferret.
- The Gunnison's prairie dog, *Cynomys gunnisoni*, is considered a keystone species, one that is not necessarily the most abundant, but exerts a large, stabilizing influence throughout an ecological community. The prairie dog is a crucial food source for many predatory birds and carnivores. The tunnel systems they generate also provide habitat for a wide-range of wildlife species including other small mammals, birds, reptiles, and arthropods. In addition, the highly endangered black-footed ferret depends solely on prairie dogs and their burrow systems for food and shelter.



## Cebolla Canyon Riparian Restoration

- The BLM and its valued partner agencies and organizations have been planning projects in Cebolla Canyon for over 2 years with the goals of riparian restoration and wildlife habitat improvement. Riparian characteristics had been degraded due to previous land ownership practices. In 2011, several of these projects came to fruition. This include channel realignment and erosion control structures for restoration of natural hydrologic processes, which make up the backbone of healthy riparian ecosystems. The next step in habitat restoration is revegetation using native riparian flora such as willow, cottonwood, native olive, and various herbaceous species. BLM specialists are currently working closely with the livestock permittee in this allotment to revise the riparian pasture boundaries. This will help minimize the maintenance issues that have arisen in the past, and ensure that the livestock grazing practices in the area do not adversely affect this riparian restoration effort. The BLM is establishing a maintenance program to ensure these various projects remain effective, and is committed to restoring all riparian ecosystems to Proper Functioning Condition. This restoration effort in Cebolla Canyon is ongoing and will continue over the next 2-4 years, with monitoring continuing for the next 5-10 years.



## Fire

- The BLM held prescribed fires on 3,800 acres. The Cerro Brillante prescribed fire took place within the West Malpais Wilderness. The goal of this prescribed fire was to improve forest health by reducing the number of piñon and juniper saplings that are encroaching into what was historically open grassland. Cooperators included the Albuquerque District BLM, Rio Puerco Field Office, and the Cerro Brillante, Los Cerros, and El Malpais allotment permittees. The Restore New Mexico Program and the Albuquerque District Prescribed Fire Programs funded the project.
- The 3,800 acre prescribed fire was implemented in early May of 2011 utilizing hand ignition along the boundaries to secure the perimeter and then an aerial ignition operation in the interior of the burn unit followed utilizing a helicopter and plastic sphere device. The BLM uses this technique to build heat and allow us to manipulate the fire behavior to help meet our objectives.



## **SECTION II – RECREATION FACILITIES, ROADS, AND TRAILS CONDITIONS**

### **BLM Ranger Station**

- FY 2011 visitation was 10,489.
- Eleven new temporary exhibits were constructed for the visitors. Exhibits included: a White Nose Syndrome exhibit on bats; The Night Sky; Weather in the Southwest; Animals in Winter; Camouflage in Birds; Owls in Winter; and several rotating exhibits including El Malpais NCA in the news.



### **Joe Skeen Campground**

- The Joe Skeen Campground is a ten-site campground with light to moderate use on the east side of the NCA and reached by a quarter-mile unpaved road from Highway 117. It is the only developed campground in the NCA.
- The campground went through a major upgrade in FY 2010. It reopened to the public after the BLM completed construction in January of 2011. Improvements included making the campground more accessible, adding additional fire rings, and adding shade structures and an additional vault toilet. The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act funded the project.

### **La Ventana Arch Recreation Site**

- La Ventana Natural Arch is on the east side of the NCA, immediately off Highway 117. This is the most well-known and heavily used site at the NCA. The site has a large paved parking area, accessible viewing area, interpretive panels, two vault toilets, trash receptacles, and the trailhead for the La Ventana Natural Arch Trail.

- The physical condition of the site is fair.

### **South Narrows Picnic Area**

- The South Narrows Picnic Area is on the east side of the NCA immediately off Highway 117. This is a popular day-use site during most times of the year. The site contains four sheltered picnic sites, one sheltered group site, two vault toilets, trash receptacles, and the trailhead for the Narrows Rim Trail.
- The physical condition of the site is good.

### **Continental Divide National Scenic Trail**

- The Continental Divide National Scenic Trail (CDST) passes through the western portions of the NCA for about 33 miles, including crossing the Chain of Craters WSA and West Malpais Wilderness. The Trail has both marked sections with cairns and signs and sections where tread is constructed. The BLM constructed approximately 16 miles of tread way. The remainder of the trail is marked with cairns and signs. Another 13 miles has been located using GPS for future designation through the planning process.
- The BLM established two trailheads with parking and bulletin boards on the Chain of Craters Backcountry Byway.
- The physical condition of the Trail is poor to fair due to staffing limitations, although the BLM is working with volunteers to help meet needs. Low visitor use results in revegetation on portions of the constructed trail making it difficult to follow. In addition, wildlife and cattle frequently topple cairns and signs.
- Staff hiked the entire length of the CDNST through the NCA during FY 2011 in order to assess the conditions and plan work projects. The BLM had four work projects with many volunteers that totaled 664 volunteer hours.



### **Narrows Rim Trail**

- This Narrows Rim Trail originates at the South Narrows Picnic Area, extends 4 miles along the tops of the rimrock cliffs of the Cebolla Wilderness, and ends at a point overlooking La Ventana Natural Arch. This Trail is one of the most popular hikes within the NCA. The physical condition of this Trail is good, requiring little maintenance because of the soil type it crosses.

## **La Ventana Natural Arch Trail**

- This is a quarter-mile Trail originating at the La Ventana Natural Arch Recreation Site and terminating within the Cebolla Wilderness at a viewpoint for the arch. It is one of the most heavily used trails at the NCA since it accesses the natural arch.
- While the Trail itself is well-constructed and maintained and the condition is good, the BLM must respond to damage from surface flows.
- The BLM rehabilitated social trails leading up the steep hillside to the arch.

## **Nature Trail**

- The Nature Trail at the Ranger Station is a one-mile loop route with a short side trail to a viewpoint. As staff at the Ranger Station promote it, use of the trail is light but increasing.
- In FY 2011, the BLM used the Trail for several interpretive hikes and school programs because it is an ideal location for on-site school programs. The programs highlighted the geologic, cultural, and other natural history subjects found near the Ranger Station and Nature Trail.
- The physical condition of the Trail is fair to good with the resource trends declining.
- The BLM has done work to improve the steep portions of the trail.

## **State Highways**

- Two paved state highways provide immediate access to the NCA: Highway 117 in the east side and Highway 53 in the northwestern side of the NCA. These highways are in good to excellent condition, and are not under BLM jurisdiction.

## **Chain of Craters Backcountry Byway**

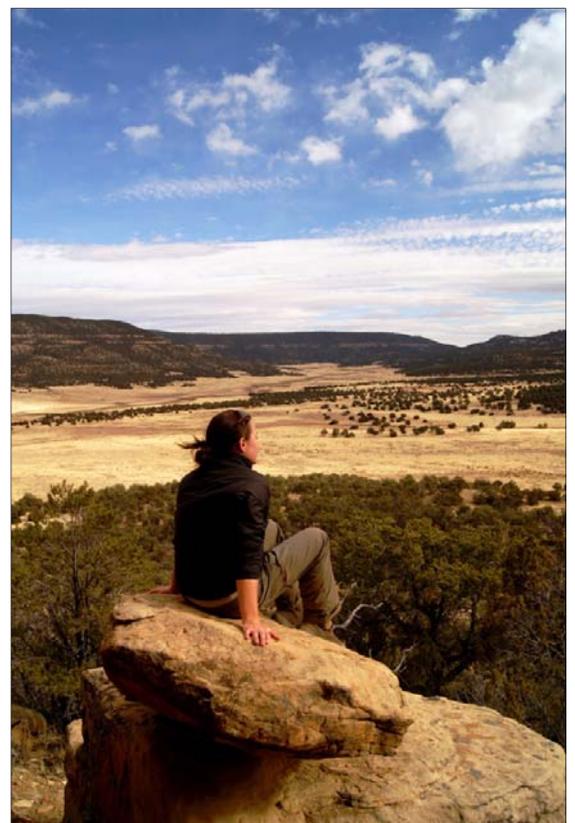
- The Chain of Craters Backcountry Byway is approximately 33 miles long on County Road 42. Connecting to both Highway 117 and Highway 53, it is the sole maintained road in the western portions of the NCA. Since it receives only minimal maintenance from the County, the condition of the road is fair. The road is impassible during much of the winter and during the summer monsoon seasons. The road is not under BLM jurisdiction.

## **Cebolla Canyon Road**

- The Cebolla Canyon Road provides public access through the NCA from Highway 117 to County Road 103. Portions of the road received significant maintenance to help control storm runoff and reduce erosion.

## **Other Roads**

- As identified in the El Malpais Plan, vehicle use is limited to the more than 270 miles of designated



routes. The majority of these routes are dirt roads and two-tracks, which are rarely maintained, and as a result add a sense of adventure to travelling in the NCA. The physical condition of almost all of these routes is very poor to poor with some being in fair condition. The resource trends adjacent to these routes are usually declining to severely declining.

- Frequent, illegal, off-road vehicle use occurs on closed roads and sometimes cross-country, often into wilderness and wilderness study areas. Work is ongoing to identify and rehabilitate these cross-country intrusions as soon as possible.

### **Maintenance**

- Annual maintenance is currently meeting the needs of the public and the BLM.
- A major deferred project is reconstruction of Cebolla Canyon Road.

### **Sign Plan**

- The NCA has an approved sign plan, but there is a need to revise it.
- Not all current signing meets BLM standards.

## **SECTION III – OUTREACH, ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION, INTERPRETATION, AND VOLUNTEERS**

- In FY 2009, the BLM updated the El Malpais NCA website. Since then, the BLM added a link to the website to give the public access to the guided hikes and programs. In FY 2011, the El Malpais NCA website got 3,500 hits.
- In FY 2011, the NCA was in the newspaper over 50 times. The majority of newspaper clippings were in the local newspaper, the Cibola Beacon, and several stories ran in the Gallup Independent.
- The local radio station, *The Nature Minute*, runs weekly spots on the NCA.

### **Outreach efforts include:**

- BLM Ranger Station on Highway 117
- Northwest New Mexico Visitor Center in Grants
- Brochures available at the visitor centers
- El Malpais NCA web site: <http://www.blm.gov/nm/elmalpais>
- Interpretive signs and kiosks
- Interpretive programs, such as ranger-guided hikes and programs provided by BLM staff
- Environmental education and school programs provided by BLM staff.
- BLM staff-written articles describing guided hikes and interpretive programs published in the Grants and Gallup newspapers.
- A staff-written article describing outdoor recreation opportunities on public lands published in a monthly outdoors column.
- Fostering relationships with local reporters who have written several articles on NCA events.
- KDSK Radio Interviews on a segment called *The Nature Minute*.

## **Environmental Education**

- In FY 2011, 4,480 youth were engaged in 167 youth initiative programs. That is almost double the amount of youth engaged last fiscal year. The most successful programs were outdoor classroom sessions put on at the BLM Ranger Station for the Los Alamitos Middle School. Presenters came from around the state for the two-day events with the middle school students. In addition, the BLM



partnership with the Future Foundations Program was very successful, engaging almost 900 youth in the local community. \$30,000 in youth funding provided two Student Conservation Association (SCA) interns to assist the NCA staff with youth programs and other activities. The SCA interns were critical in the youth numbers that the NCA had.

## **Volunteers**

- In FY 2011, the NCA had 2,323 volunteer hours. Volunteers play a key role in the everyday activities of the NCA, from staffing the visitor centers to helping with interpretive programs. Over 1,600 of those volunteer hours were in environmental education and interpretation.
- Without volunteers to staff the BLM Ranger Station, NCA staff would be severely limited from performing many other crucial functions.

## **SECTION IV – SCIENCE**

### **Overview**

- Tree ring dating has continued throughout the NCA for the past four fiscal years. Ron Towner of the University of Arizona Tree Ring Lab is conducting tree-ring dating of historic homesteads and Navajo structures in the NCA. The University of Arizona's Dendroarchaeology field school included sites on the NCA in field schools.

## **SECTION V – PARTNERSHIPS**

### **Student Conservation Association**

- FY 2011, the NCA started a partnership with the SCA. Two education interns worked with the NCA and provided approximately 1,500 hours of service. While they focused on youth education and outreach programs, they also provided support for all other aspects of NCA operations. Together they presented 30 youth programs and reached out to 550 youth in the local community.

- The NCA also hosted an SCA Desert Conservation crew. Over a period of 14 weeks, the 7-person crew provided over 3,000 hours of service on the NCA working on a wide variety of wilderness and natural resource protection and restoration projects.



### **Futures Foundation in Grants**

- The BLM has developed an environmental education partnership with the Futures Foundations in Grants, NM. The Futures Foundation facility was developed to provide after-school educational opportunities for local youth. The NCA staff has developed and presented programs designed to broaden their knowledge of natural and cultural resources found at El Malpais. In FY 2011, 34 youth programs were presented at the Futures Foundation Center to 878 youth. This partnership began late in FY 2009.



### **Cottonwood Gulch Foundation**

- In FY 2012, the BLM established a partnership with the Cottonwood Gulch Foundation. The Gulch Foundation teaches children knowledge through wilderness adventures. The BLM Park Rangers did 10 programs with Cottonwood Gulch in FY 2011 for 266 youth.

### **Northwest New Mexico Visitor Center**

- The BLM, National Park Service (NPS), and the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) cooperatively manage the Northwest New Mexico Visitor Center in Grants, NM. This partnership encourages and promotes the interagency use of personnel across agency

boundaries. The goal is to provide excellent visitor services, which transcends visitor expectations and anticipates the needs of those we serve.

- The visitor center serves as a venue for connecting people to the land and special places, highlighting the opportunities for resource conservation and protection for current and future generations.
- As a part of our cooperation at the Center, the NCA staff joins with our partners to conduct on- and off-site interpretive and education programs.

### **El Malpais National Monument**

- The partnership between the NCA and El Malpais National Monument (managed by the NPS) goes back to 1989 when the El Malpais Act created both areas. Since then, the BLM and the NPS have shared expertise and personnel in all management activities. Areas of cooperation include joint planning for the CDST, wilderness management, providing staff support for interpretation events, and managing and operating the Northwest New Mexico Visitor Center.

### **Cibola National Forest**

- The BLM's Grants Field Station is located within a USFS administrative site. Areas of cooperation include joint planning for the Continental Divide National Scenic Trail, providing staff support for interpretation events, and managing and operating the Northwest New Mexico Visitor Center.

### **Albuquerque BioPark**

- The Albuquerque BioPark continues to send docents to the NCA for assistance with environmental education programs. The NCA staff provides training for their docents.

### **Environmental Educators Association of New Mexico**

- NCA staff collaborates with the Environmental Educators Association of New Mexico and assists them by providing off-site programs.

### **Cebolla Canyon Restoration**

- This project, described in the restoration section above, is a partnership, which includes the Albuquerque Wildlife Federation, the New Mexico Wilderness Alliance, the New Mexico Environment Department, the Rio Puerco Management Committee, the Rio Puerco Alliance, and the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish.

### **City of Santa Fe**

- Santa Fe city ordinances require that prairie dogs be trapped and relocated when they become a problem or before construction activities can occur. The NCA, a potential reintroduction site for the black-footed ferret, needs a larger prairie dog colony to support the ferret. Prairie dogs trapped in Santa Fe are released at approved sites within the NCA. This partnership is a perfect match for both entities.

## **University of Arizona**

- The BLM has developed a partnership with Ron Towner of the University of Arizona's Tree Ring Lab that focuses on tree-ring dating of historic homesteads and Navajo structures in the NCA. The University of Arizona's Dendroarchaeology field school has included sites on the NCA in its last two field schools. This partnership is mutually beneficial as it contributes to Dr. Towner's research, provides educational opportunities through the field school, and provides the BLM with detailed information about its cultural resources that the BLM could use for both management and interpretation.

## **New Mexico State University**

- This new and developing partnership began when several New Mexico State University staff joined the NCA as volunteers. Efforts are expanding to find ways to share resources and expertise.

## **Habitat Stamp Program**

- The Habitat Stamp Program is a joint effort between the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish, the BLM, the USFS, non-profit organizations, and the general public to plan, develop, maintain, and coordinate conservation and rehabilitation programs that are designed to have a positive impact on wildlife and fish populations.

## **SECTION VI – PLANNING AND BUSINESS PRACTICES**

### **Planning**

- The formal land-use planning process for the El Malpais Plan Area (Plan Area) was completed in September 2001 with the approval of the Record of Decision for the *Proposed El Malpais Plan and Final Environmental Impact Statement* (September 2000) (Plan). The approved El Malpais Plan amended the *Rio Puerco Resource Management Plan* (RMP). The approved Plan also included activity-level decisions for management of the resources of the Plan Area.
- The Plan was prepared to consolidate all decisions and management guidance currently applicable to the Plan Area. The majority of the decisions and guidance are taken from the Plan.
- Since RMP decisions applicable to the Plan Area continue to be valid, except as they were amended by the Plan, decisions and guidance from the Rio Puerco RMP and its amendments, which are applicable to the Plan Area, are included in this stand-alone Plan.
- Activity-level decisions from the Plan and activity-level decisions tiered from the Rio Puerco RMP are also included in this stand-alone Plan. This includes a Travel Management Plan.
- The Plan is arranged as 21 separate management plans for the various resources managed by the Rio Puerco Field Office in the Plan Area. It has been prepared as a resource to be utilized by the Rio Puerco Field Office resource specialists who will implement the Plan. The decisions and guidance that apply to more than one resource are duplicated in each resource section. Each of the 21 resource plan sections is complete on its own to make implementation as straightforward as possible.