Forest Service News Release

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USDA Forest Service Awards $30 Million for Landscape Restoration in Northern New Mexico, Southern Colorado

SANTA FE, NM – May 3, 2022 – The Rio Chama Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Project (CFLRP) will receive approximately $3 million a year for the next 10 years to restore forest health, reduce the risk of destructive wildfire and support local rural economies across 3.8 million acres in New Mexico and Colorado.

Congress established the competitive Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program to encourage the collaborative, science-based ecosystem restoration of priority forest landscapes. The Rio Chama proposal was developed by a diverse collaborative that includes four national forests, partner agencies, non-governmental organizations, tribal nations and private landowners. The USDA Forest Service and 2-3-2 Cohesive Strategy Partnership will lead the collaborative by providing a framework to implement effective forest restoration across multiple jurisdictions.

Over 50% of the project landscape, approximately 1.9 million acres, is managed by the Forest Service on the San Juan and Rio Grande National Forests in southern Colorado and the Carson and Santa Fe National Forests in northern New Mexico. The remaining lands within the project area are held by tribal nations, the states of Colorado and New Mexico, the Bureau of Land Management, Bureau of Reclamation, community land grants, and private landowners.

The Rio Chama CFLRP uses a collaborative all-lands approach to improve the health of a priority landscape by:
- Increasing the forests' resilience to disturbances like wildfire, insects and disease, and climate change
- Restoring watershed and riparian areas to improve water quality and watershed function
- Improving range conditions and wildlife habitat and connectivity
- Supporting local rural economies and creating jobs by utilizing restoration byproducts
- Connecting with tribal, land grant and acequia communities, and engaging youth in public land management

"This potential funding of $30 million over the next decade allows us to use the best-available science to accelerate the restoration, conservation and protection of an important landscape steeped in history and culture," Santa Fe National Forest Supervisor Debbie Cress said. "The objective is to ensure that our forests continue to provide a sustainable economy for our rural communities, recreational opportunities for thousands of visitors a year, and clean and abundant water for everyone downstream."

Aaron Kimple, Program Director at Mountain Studies Institute and the Coordinator for the 2-3-2, added, "This is an opportunity for the Forest Service and local communities to work together on planning and implementing a program that will address and support diverse interests and local values."

"We are working at a landscape-scale by bringing together land managers, landowners, and stakeholders in multiple jurisdictions to implement cross-boundary restoration in a vast landscape with a lot of interests," said

Esmé Cadiente, the Southwest Regional Director for the Forest Stewards Guild and Manager for the Greater Santa Fe Fireshed Coalition. "We know this will be challenging, but we are all committed to the shared stewardship of this landscape to support the ecological and community needs of the region."

The Rio Chama CFLRP builds on existing collaborative partnerships and forest restoration work currently underway to prioritize projects and leverage funding from multiple public and private sources. Analysis under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) has been completed for more than 450,000 acres, and the project area is within the footprint of the Rio Grande Water Fund, a 20-year program to protect and restore vital forests upstream to ensure a continuous supply of clean water downstream for more than one million people. Site-specific conditions and needs will determine the mix of treatments on the ground, including prescribed fire and forest thinning.

Implementation of the Rio Chama CFLRP in coordination with adjacent projects (Greater Santa Fe Fireshed, Southwest Jemez CFLRP, Southwest Colorado CFLRP, Zuni Mountain CFLRP) that are incorporating similar restoration strategies will leverage investments on the landscape and multiply the environmental impact across the entire region.

The federal funding, which comes through the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and annual appropriations, is targeted at reducing the risk of severe wildfire, supporting local economies, creating jobs, and enhancing forest and watershed health. The CFLRP program aligns with national policy to address the wildfire crisis, including the Forest Service's recently announced 10-year strategy which will dramatically increase the scale of forest health treatments over the next decade.

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