

# DEVELOPING COPSE CUTTING SITES IN THE UPPER RIO GRANDE

Building riparian plant supply chains that support rural livelihoods and healthy watersheds

July  
2025

Riparian restoration in the Upper Rio Grande Basin supports clean water, agriculture, wildlife, and multiple pueblos, towns, and municipalities. Local efforts aim to extend spring runoff, reduce erosion, cool streams, ensure continued agricultural use, and improve wildlife habitat. Planting native trees like willows and cottonwoods is a key part of this work.

These plants can regrow from cuttings, making them ideal for riparian restoration. Willows planted from lower to higher elevations may better survive prolonged drought and increasing annual temperatures. However, repeated harvesting from nearby plants can lead to overuse.

This project explored creating dedicated **copse cutting sites** where willows (*salix spp.*) can be grown, harvested, and sold to:

1. **Increase the riparian plant supply for restoration projects.**
2. **Develop a network of propagation sites across elevational gradients and climates.**
3. **Promote local economic opportunity.**



## WHAT IS COPSE CUTTING?

Many plants regrow from cut or damaged stems and roots. *Coppicing* is the process of working with this growth characteristic to promote desired woodland or riparian habitat. *Copse cutting* sites are the project locations where plant materials are propagated and harvested.

“Growing restoration plant materials is an important part of growing a restoration economy and an opportunity for agricultural diversification.” - Sandee D., Rio Chama CFLRP Project Manager

## SANTA CLARA PUEBLO

Copse cutting at Santa Clara Pueblo fit into their holistic riparian restoration efforts, which include pre-fire preparedness, post-fire recovery, workforce development, and plant stewardship.

- Leaders in watershed-scale restoration
- Involved in the Rio Chama Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Project
- Building a native plant nursery
- Including Santa Fe Indian School students in restoration projects
- Willing to trial a copse cutting site
- Incorporating multiple ways of knowing for willow propagation



Thank you to the Institute of Applied Ecology and Los Lunas Plant Materials Center for their guidance.

## Completed

Discussed copse cutting host sites with ranchers, land trusts, and pueblos from Abiquiu to the San Luis Valley.

Determined elevations of upcoming, concentrated riparian projects (7000+ ft).

Mapped 6 willow, 2 cottonwood, 1 box elder, 1 maple, and 2 invasive tree species in Santa Clara Canyon. Harvested and planted 6 willow species at upstream site.

Santa Clara Pueblo and Santa Fe Indian School students completed four days of harvest and planting. Additional cuttings to be stored in the Pueblo's new plant nursery.

## Learned

Potential growers are interested and excited. They want economic assurances and help identifying willow species.

US Forest Service managed lands are on average higher in elevation than potential host sites.

The diversity of willow species provides ecological and cultural benefits. Hybridization makes species ID difficult.

Communities should play a leading role in copse cutting projects. These projects can promote socio-ecological restoration.

## Needed

A marketability report, outlining desired species and growth elevations, and anticipated demand per year over time.

A better understanding of what genotypes will survive in which environments → Research and mapping to align project and host sites.

Willow ID training programs and a team of pros able to align host site and field site species needs.

Form a Native Plant Material Working Group to build upon this pilot and work toward a community-based Native Plant Material Network.

## NEXT STEP: DEVELOP A NATIVE PLANT MATERIAL NETWORK

TRANSFORM PILOT INTO A REGIONAL NATIVE PLANT SUPPLY NETWORK, LED BY A MULTI-PARTNER TEAM FOCUSED ON ECOLOGICAL RESTORATION AND RURAL ECONOMIC RESILIENCE.



The Rio Chama Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Project promotes a regional **Restoration Economy** - where more restoration is sustained and the work it requires expands rural economic opportunities over time.

Copse cutting, and a **Native Plant Material Network**, are one pillar of this restoration economy, in which tribes, pueblos, and other agricultural producers could grow specific willows (with known genotypes) across northern New Mexico and southern Colorado. In 2025, willow canes sell for \$2-3 each. For many agricultural producers, willows growing in acequias and irrigation infrastructure are viewed as “water hogs” and desirable to remove. Copse cutting sites in these places could pay irrigators to remove willows.

Willows (*salix spp.*) grow throughout northern New Mexico and southern Colorado, with over 23 species recorded in the SEINet botanical database. Our current understanding is that site elevation and species drought tolerance are strong determinants of planting survival, and a coordinated Native Plant Materials Network could organize and align copse cuttings sites to appropriate project site elevations and species needs.

A **dedicated lead, and coordination funding**, will be needed to build the network, recruit copse cutting hosts, establish and maintain copse cutting sites, link growers with purchasers, and promote and sustain an economically beneficial native plant material network.

The Natural Resources Conservation Service was growing and selling willow cuttings to support riparian restoration. This work was ended 6+ years ago to create space for non-federal entities to benefit from willow purchases. A Native Plant Material Network could fill this role and expand it.