

# Funds to help restore state fish habitat

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Every year in late spring, 200 volunteers hike into Rio Grande Gorge north of Taos. Their backpacks are each filled with a few gallons of water – and 100 young Rio Grande cutthroat trout.

A Rio Grande cutthroat trout at the Game and Fish Seven Springs Hatchery near Fenton Lake. Conservation groups in New Mexico and Colorado have received funding to restore the trout's habitat. The cutthroat trout is New Mexico's state fish. (Theresa Davis/Albuquerque Journal)

The state fish of New Mexico thrives in clear, cold, high-altitude streams, which means its habitat is threatened by wildfires, warming waters and invasive trout species. Now, the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation has awarded more than half a million dollars as part of a new recovery program.

Toner Mitchell, Trout Unlimited's New Mexico Water and Habitat and Public Lands Coordinator, said the money will fund stream improvements and fish restoration. Trout Unlimited will receive \$96,059 for New Mexico projects and \$152,416 for Colorado projects.

"I think of our work as reintroducing the people of New Mexico to their fish," Mitchell said. "I grew up around Taos, and in the '70s and '80s, you could drive to a spot to catch one of these fish. Now you have to strap on a backpack to see a Rio Grande cutthroat trout."

Agencies and tribes in New Mexico and Colorado renewed a conservation agreement in 2013 with a strategy to protect the fish. The groups have restored trout habitat on Comanche Creek, a main tributary of the Rio Costilla and just a few miles from the Colorado state line.

"We want to bring these new fish populations into the best available habitat," said Kevin Terry, Trout Unlimited Rio Grande Basin Project Manager. "We have spent decades reconnecting stream miles, removing non-native trout and stocking streams with Rio Grande cutthroat trout. Then the agencies check in on those fish to make sure they're healthy and reproducing."

On Comanche Creek, the groups have reduced bank erosion and raised the riparian water table by at least a foot, which improves stream flow and habitat for the sensitive fish.

Terry said a strong public connection to the trout is what will ultimately save the species.

The new funding will help assess habitat restoration work for tributary streams of the Rio San Antonio.

**The Center for Biological Diversity wants Rio Grande cutthroat trout to be listed under the Endangered Species Act.** But many conservationists believe they can save the fish without federal protection.

The restoration projects are already working, said Mitchell, who added that restrictions on grazing, fishing and land use that usually accompany an endangered status could turn the Rio Grande cutthroat trout into "public enemy No. 1."

"People who work the land in New Mexico are great potential partners," he said. "Listing would make it more difficult to interact with the fish, and those people who are our eyes on the landscape might start viewing it as something negative."

The Rio Puerco Alliance will also receive \$151,684 as part of this program to minimize bank erosion on Encinado Creek in Rio Arriba County and create a barrier to keep out invasive trout species.

