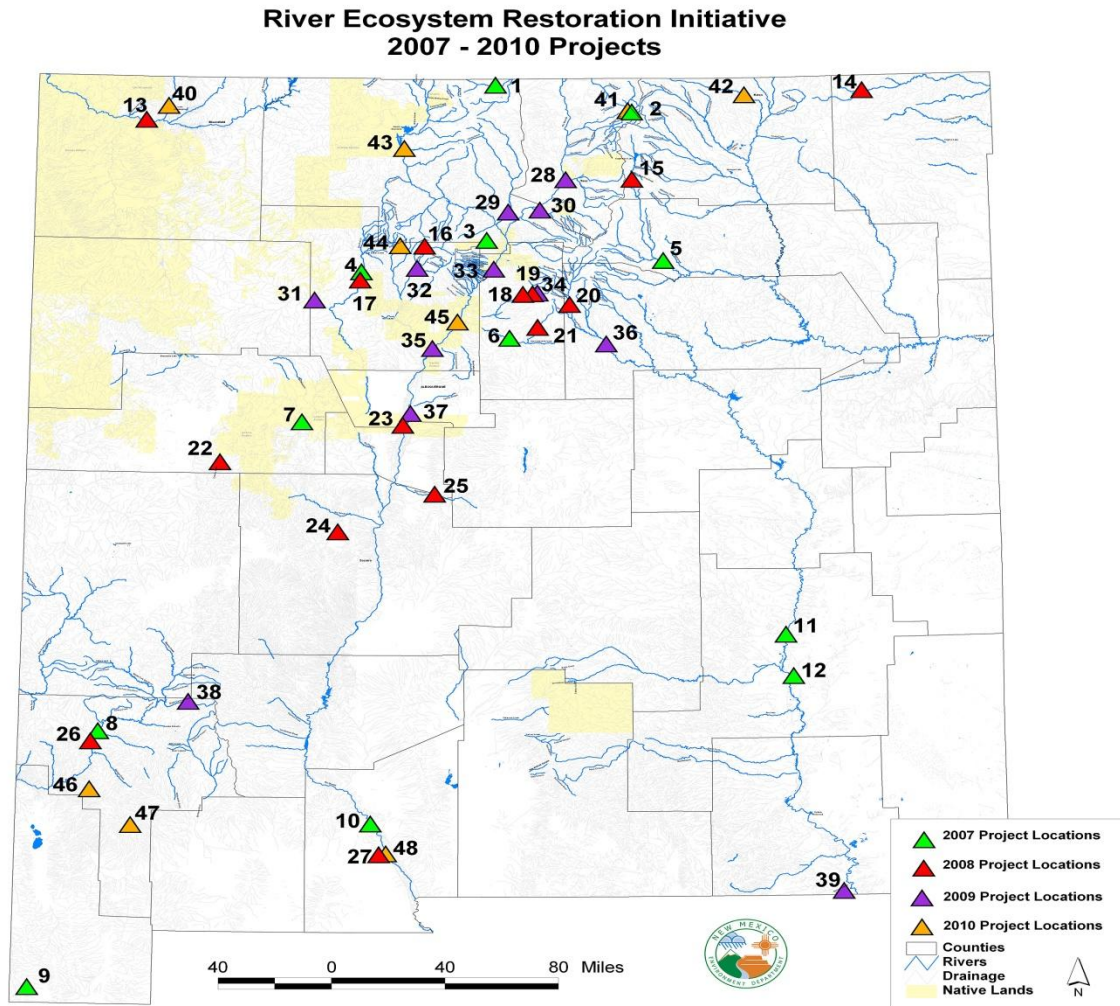


What's next for river restoration in New Mexico?



In 2007, as part of Governor Bill Richardson “Year of Water” initiative, he requested that the New Mexico State Legislature fund a new program, the River Ecosystem Restoration Initiative, or RERI. Its purpose was to restore instream ecosystem functions and watershed health to major water basins throughout New Mexico. Denise Fort, the governor’s appointee to the Water Trust Board and a member of the governor’s Transition Team for water, had suggested it to Richardson as a means of balancing the state’s water development programs with a program to further environmental values in rivers.

Once the legislature appropriated the money each year, the New Mexico Environment Department solicited proposals; each was evaluated according to more than a dozen criteria by a committee made up of representatives from the state's natural resource agencies. The proposed projects had to be scientifically sound and sustainable, says Karen Menetrey, Environmental Scientist/Specialist with RERI, and also have stakeholder support and a commitment to ongoing maintenance and stewardship.

Over the course of four years, RERI supported 48 projects across the state to the tune of \$8.2 million.

Each year, Menetrey says, the agency received between 22 and 30 proposals, though it could only fund 12 four-year projects each year. The first 12 projects finished up last year—and collectively, treated 35 river miles and 2,394 riparian acres.

"What that means is different in each project," she says, pointing out that in some cases projects involved removing hydrological barriers to flows, like dykes and dams and berms; removing nonnative vegetation and replanting with native vegetation; or using bioengineering erosion control measures along arroyos and streambeds to hold banks in place.

"People especially liked (RERI) because it was statewide, there wasn't a match requirement, and in fact, they could use RERI funding to match federal grants in some cases," she says.

But this year, no funding was provided for the program. That means the program will expire in June 2014, when the last of the four-year projects ends.

The apparent demise of RERI is lamented within the private sector, as well as among nonprofits and federal agencies, such as the US Fish and Wildlife Service. (See stories in this issue about the San Juan River and the Pecos River.)

Despite the loss of funding, Menetrey is optimistic about the impact RERI has had statewide.

"One of the wonderful things about RERI is the tremendous amount of partners who have been involved in the projects—I have a list of about 200 partners, that range from tribes and pueblos to soil conservation districts to conservation groups to schools," she says. "Lots of people have been involved, and all of the contractors are very committed to what they're doing. They're committed to conservation and restoration, and they're committed to the specific places they're working on."

RERI funding has also acted as seed money, helping spur projects that might never have happened.

“When we look at the sum total of the \$8.2 million, we can say of that \$8.2 million from the state, the collaborators have brought in a one-to-one match from different sources—from federal sources, private donations, and nonprofit donations,” she says. “RERI has created a tremendous momentum for restoration work.”

For more information:

New Mexico Environment Department Surface Water Quality Bureau River Ecosystem Restoration Initiative:

<http://www.nmenv.state.nm.us/swqb/RERI/>

2007-1010 Project Tables:

<http://www.nmenv.state.nm.us/swqb/RERI/Tables/index.html>

River Ecosystem Restoration Initiative booklet:

<ftp://ftp.nmenv.state.nm.us/www/swqb/RERI/RERI-Booklet.pdf>