



# EDD

ECONOMIC  
DEVELOPMENT  
DEPARTMENT

## OUTDOOR RECREATION DIVISION

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## **State Enacts Formal Water Protections for 125.9 Miles of Northern New Mexico Streams**

*The Water Quality Control Commission officially designated 125.9 miles of Northern New Mexico rivers as Outstanding National Resource Waters based on their recreational, ecological, and cultural significance*

**SANTA FE, N.M.** – The Outdoor Recreation Division (ORD) of the Economic Development Department (EDD) joins a diverse coalition, including Tribal leaders, local governments, farmers, acequia members, outdoor recreationists, and water conservation groups, to celebrate the Water Quality Control Commission’s (WQCC) decision today to protect significant portions of six streams with [Outstanding National Resource Waters \(ONRW\) designations](#). The protected waters include segments of the Rio Grande, Rio Hondo, Lake Fork, East Fork Jemez River, San Antonio Creek, and Redondo Creek.

The WQCC voted on the ORD-led Outstanding Waters petition on Tuesday, July 12, after public hearings in April and June. ONRW designation for these ecologically and recreationally significant waters supports and protects existing community uses, such as [ranching and farming](#), while prohibiting new pollution from impacting these watersheds.

“The WQCC’s action today shows how conservation of exceptional New Mexico lands and waters is good for the environment and the economy,” EDD Cabinet Secretary Alicia J. Keyes said. “Dozens of outdoor recreation businesses in Northern New Mexico testified in this ORD petition about the importance these rivers have on their livelihoods and the economic health of the region.”

ONRW designations for significant portions of the six streams garnered support from over 50 Pueblos, local governments, acequias associations, land grants, schools, neighborhood associations, businesses, and nonprofit organizations. There were more than 2,215 public comments in support of the petition. The total mileage amounts to over 125 miles of rivers protected in perpetuity for recreationists, local parciantes [individual irrigators who own water rights], wildlife, and more.

ORD filed the petition with the commission after years of community outreach. “After two plus years of community outreach, the state has formally protected over 125 miles of exceptional New Mexico waterways,” ORD Director Axie Navas said. “This is a major accomplishment when it comes to New Mexico’s outdoor economy, as clean, healthy, accessible waters are essential to our residents, businesses, and traditional communities.”

When she created the ORD in 2019, Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham identified the outdoor recreation industry as a key target sector to diversify the New Mexico economy. Since then,

the office has invested approximately \$2 million in outdoor recreation grants and business programs, including the first-of-its-kind Outdoor Equity Fund and the state's first outdoor business accelerator. ORD has prioritized conservation and sustainable growth of the outdoor economy. Director Axie Navas sits on [the Gov. Lujan Grisham's 30x30 Executive Order task force](#) as the ORD representative.

The outdoor recreation and tourism economies are powerhouses throughout New Mexico and especially in Taos and Sandoval counties, where the protections will take effect. The outdoor industry contributes almost \$2 billion a year to New Mexico's GDP and employs over 25,000 people, according to the Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA). In 2020, boating and fishing were the second largest drivers of state outdoor economy, generating \$100.96 million for state's GDP. The economic impact of boating and fishing in New Mexico grew by 27 percent between 2019 and 2020, according to BEA.

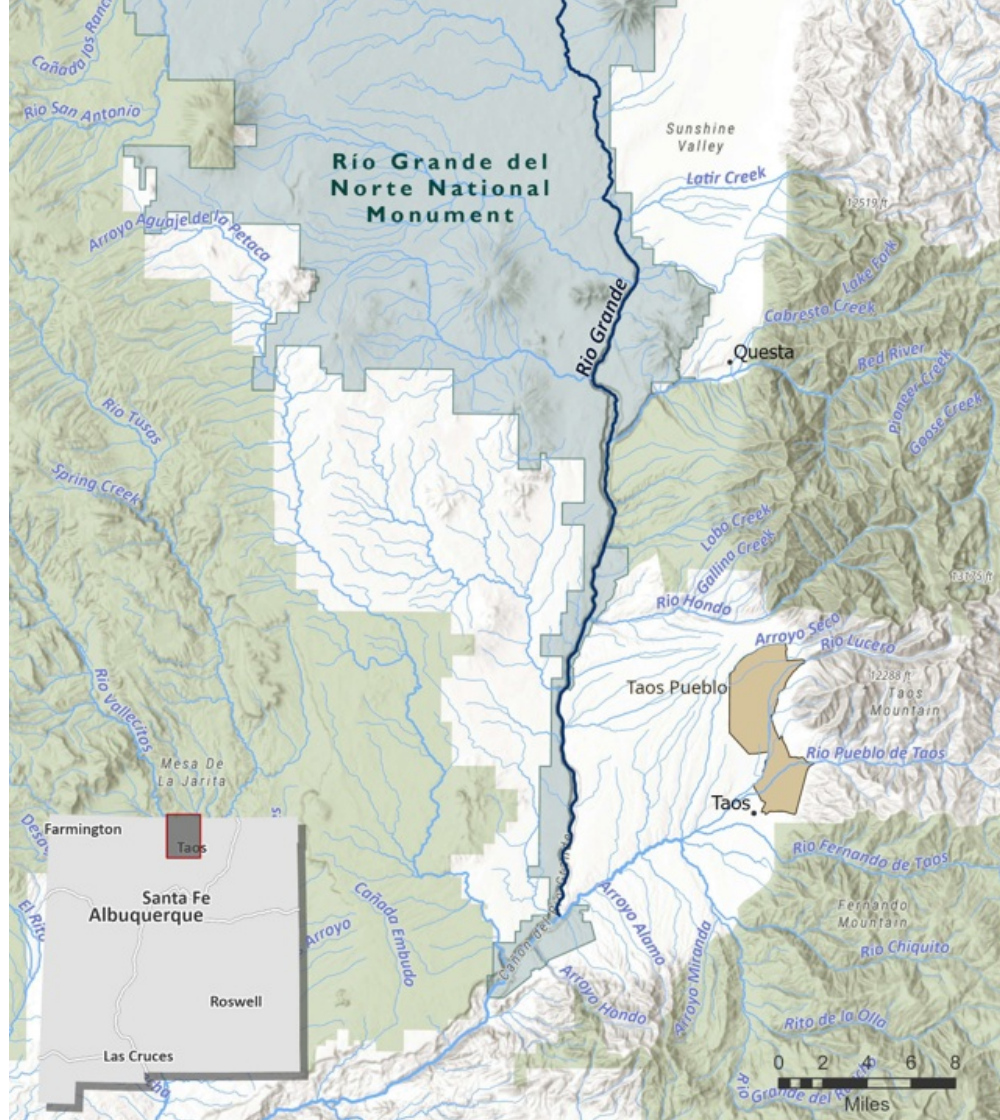
In 2019, the tourism and outdoor recreation sectors constituted 29.6 percent of jobs in Taos County and 10.1 percent of jobs in Sandoval County. Between 12 and 30 percent of visits to these counties include hiking, backpacking, and general nature enjoyment, according to data from the New Mexico Tourism Department.

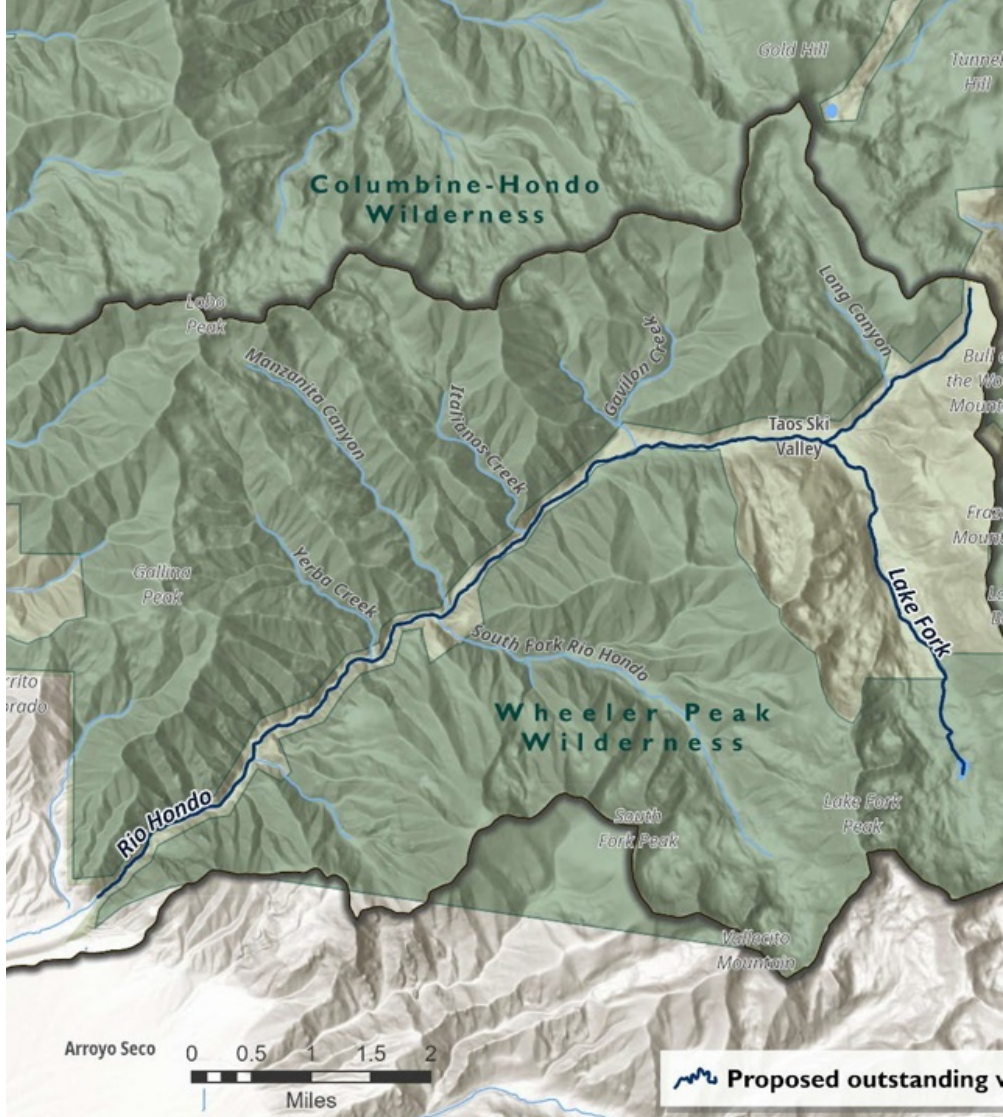
In Sandoval County, recreation is the single biggest spending category, with \$77.9 million in direct visitor spend in 2019. For Taos County, 2019 visitor spending on recreation reached almost \$30 million, having increased steadily each year since at least 2013.

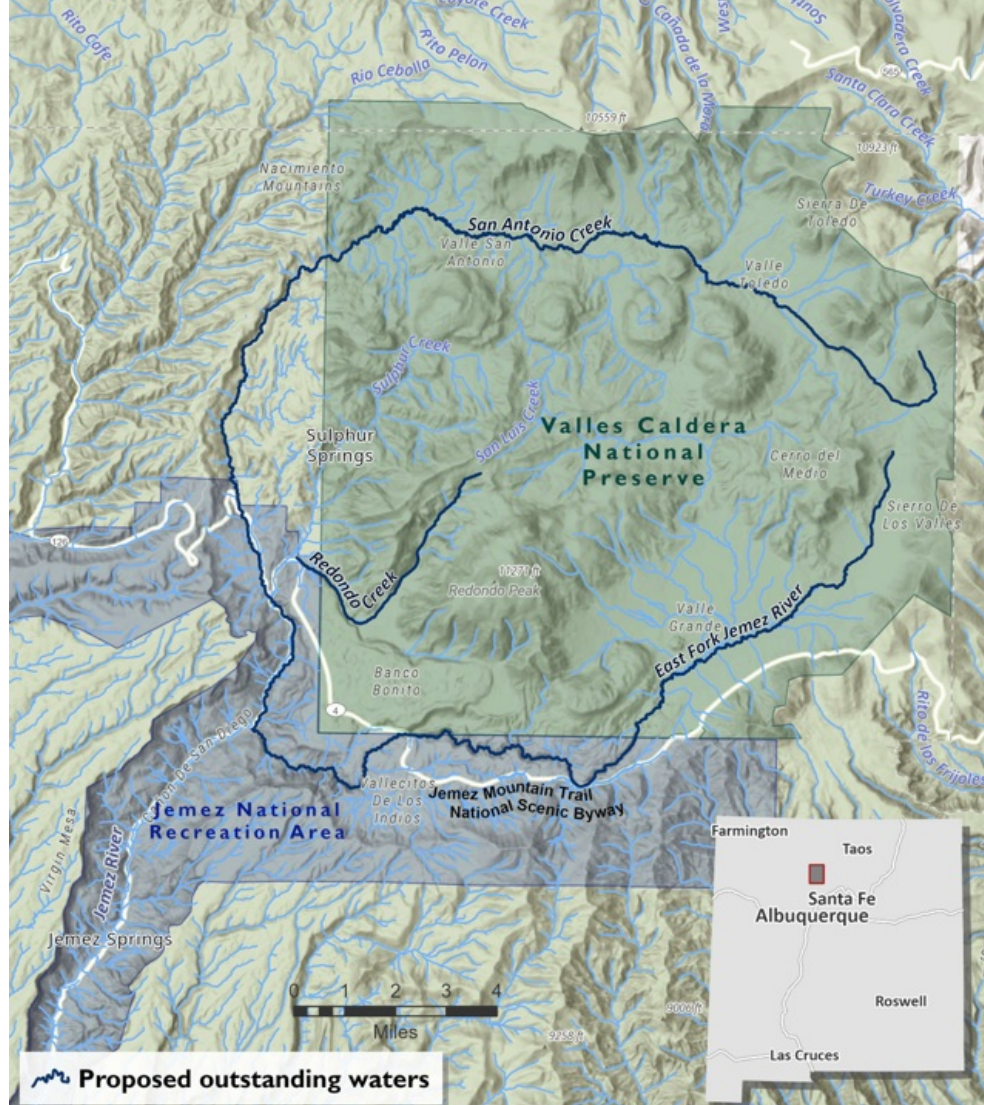
“Since time immemorial and still today, the Rio Jemez and its headwaters are the lifeblood of our people and the ecosystems that are connected to this very special place in our ancestral homelands,” Brophy Toledo, Jemez cultural leader and co-founder of Flower Hill Institute, said. “We, as Native Peoples, see the sacredness of the water ecosystems that sustain life for all the birds and animals, plants, and aquatic life that humans greatly benefit from. These protections ensure that sacred practices and irrigation can continue without additional requirements while also ensuring that new or increased pollution to the watershed is prohibited.

“Our parcientes cherish our local rivers,” Elias Espinoza, Mayordomo of the Acequia de San Antonio, which feeds from the Rio Hondo, wrote in the ONRW petition. Not only do the acequia association members irrigate with water from the Rio Hondo, “[w]e also know that our fellow parcientes on other acequias . . . depend on the Rio Hondo to irrigate food crops, pastures, and livestock. We all depend on clean unpolluted waters from our local river for our quality of life.”









Photos and images courtesy of the ORD petition.

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*The New Mexico Economic Development Department's (EDD) mission is to improve the lives of New Mexico families by increasing economic opportunities and providing a place for businesses to thrive. EDD's programs contribute directly to this mission by providing funding to train our workforce, providing infrastructure that supports business growth, and helping every community create a thriving economy. Since Jan. 1, 2019, EDD has supported more than 13,000 new jobs and trained 8,323 New Mexicans for better pay. EDD has utilized LEDA to make investments in 53 businesses, supporting more than 7,500 new jobs at an average wage of \$70,000, \$531 million in annual payroll, \$5.2 billion in new capital investment, and a ten-year economic impact of \$30+ billion. Thirty-nine communities across 22 counties have benefited from EDD programs.*

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