**Zuni Mountains Collaborative “all-hands” meeting**

**February 12th, 2020**

**Smokey’s Circle, Grants, NM**

**Objective**

A review of 2019 progress and learning and a look ahead to 2020 and 2021.

**Next steps and Action Items**

All of the presentations from the meeting are available on the Collaborative website. The Collaborative will be planning field trips for monitoring and site visits in the spring and summer of 2020. Please watch your email and [www.zunimountainscollaborative.org](http://www.zunimountainscollaborative.org) for updates on future meetings and spring/summer field trips. Action items from the February meeting included:

1. Develop an understory fact sheet with range staff based on permanent plot data.
2. Post Large tree retention strategy to website.
3. Link the MSO injunction R3 website to zunimountainscollaborative.org
4. Clarify the effect of the MSO injunction on prescribed fire implementation. The Copperton project is moving forward, but what is the status of other projects in the area.
5. Post large tree retention strategy to zunimountainscollaborative.org
6. Reach out to Navajo Nation forestry and fire to engage as Puerco Project comes online
7. Road maintenance: FR 50 needs improvement for logging and recreational access
8. Communication between DxP marking crews and thinning contractors about the use of hand tools.
9. Zuni landscape recreation infrastructure needs: trails, signs, trailhead parking

**Meeting summary**

On Wednesday, February 12th, members of the Zuni Mountains Collaborative gathered for an “all hands” meeting in Grants to discuss the past years accomplishments and challenges and what is planned for 2020. The presentations are available on [www.zunimountainscollaborative.org](http://www.zunimountainscollaborative.org). The agenda is also available on the website.

**Attendees**

The meeting was well attended by 34 members of the Collaborative representing various groups including: U.S. Forest Service, Forest Stewards Guild, Bluewater Lake State Park, Great Old Broads for Wilderness, NM Native Plant Society, Pueblo of Laguna, Mt. Taylor/Zuni Mountain Collaborative, Forest Fitness LLC, Mt. Taylor Millwork, University of New Mexico, NM State Forestry, Ramah Navajo School Board, Timberlake Ranch Land Owners Association, Senator Tom Udall’s office, Senator Martin Heinrich’s Office, Baahaali Navajo Chapter.

**2019 Accomplishments:** Mechanical treatments, road maintenance, and prescribed and managed fire

Shawn Martin, Silviculturist for the Cibola National Forest, started by giving an overview of the 2019 field season, reviewing some of the challenges and successes the FS, operators, and partners faced that impacted mechanical treatments. These challenges included:

* A long winter reducing the time available for treatments
* Poor road conditions
* Poor (wet) soil conditions
* Mexican Spotted Owl (MSO) injunction
* Staffing shortages and turnover

The difficult winter necessitated significant road improvements on FS RD 50. Despite some funding needing to be diverted from forest treatments to road maintenance, the Cibola National Forest was successful in securing additional funding (~1.2 million) from the Regional office to support forest treatments over the next few years.

Eddie Baca Acting FMO, gave an overview of Rx and managed fire in 2019. In 2019, the Mt. Taylor Ranger District (MTRD) accomplished about 11,000 acres of prescribed and managed wildfire. The Triple Nickel fire on the north side of Mt. Taylor was managed for resource benefit treating 8,000 acres of forest. The MTRD was also able to accomplish ~3,000 acres of prescribed fire. The scale of prescribed fire on the district has increased as district staff have become more accustomed to working with aerial ignitions. Excellent fire effects have been observed from both the Rx and managed fire.

**Monitoring**: Vegetation, water quality, and socioeconomic

Gabe Kohler with the Forest Stewards Guild provided a review of vegetation monitoring conducted by Chris Guiterman and what monitoring data has told us about forest resilience from treatments. A summary of Chris’ findings are available on the collaborative’s website. The monitoring signaled that Forest restoration treatments in the Zuni Mountains enhanced forest resilience to fire, bark beetle attacks, and drought across the monitoring area by reducing stand densities, decreasing the connectivity of canopy fuels, and preserving large and old trees. The group expressed interest in doing a similar analysis on changes to understory species composition and groundcover pre- and post- treatment.

Matt Piccarello reviewed water quality monitoring efforts in 2019. The Collaborative has been collecting water quality monitoring data in the Zuni Mountains CFLR Landscape since 2013. Out efforts have focused on habitat areas for the Federally listed endangered Zuni Bluehead Sucker in Agua Remora and Tampico Draw. Recent challenges related to water quality monitoring include in-stream devices being tampered with, stolen, and the end of their lifespan. In 2020, the Collaborative will look to replace the devices and work with the Water Quality monitoring sub-group to refine our methods.

The Collaborative has also been maintaining a Remote Automated Weather Station (RAWS) near the McGaffey lookout tower. The recent switch to 5g cellular networks has necessitated the RAWS being offline while the Forest Stewards Guild replaces the modem and antenna. The RAWS will be operational again in Spring 2020.

Collaborative partners have been critical for collecting and analyzing water quality data. The Cibola National Forest has a long-standing partnership with the University of New Mexico. Student work has focused on qualifying the characteristics of springs in the Zuni Mountains and data collected by the collaborative has been used in dissertations and published papers. Current student research done by UNM Water Resources student Luke Collis is focusing on Sawyer Fen. The Cibola National Forest is also partnering with the Spring Stewardship Institute to characterize springs throughout the Zuni Mountains.

**Mexican Spotted Owl Injunction**

Shawn provided an update on the status of the Mexican Spotted Owl injunction. Currently, all mechanical treatments are halted in the Zuni Mountains. An October, 2019 court order [approving stipulation modifying judgement](https://www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/fseprd674162.pdf) cleared the way for prescribed fire operations within the Bluewater EA and the 3,600 Copperton Rx burn unit. However, the unit requires additional environmental/cultural analysis that has put prescribed fire in the Zuni Mountains on hold until further notice. Region 3 (Defendant) and Wild Earth Guardians (Plaintiff) are currently working through several motions and counter motions. Matt Allen described the impact that this injunction has had on his business and the financial stability of many community members in the Grants area. The group reflected on the tradeoffs associated with managing for keystone species, including the potential loss of other endangered or threatened species as the result of stopping forest management to reduce wildfire severity. Region 3 has a list of all court documents, press releases, and monitoring reports and data related to the MSO injunction. Those documents are available here [Region 3 MSO.](https://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/r3/home/?cid=FSEPRD666433)

**Forest and Watershed Restoration Act**

Clay Benton with NM State Forestry gave an update on the Forest and Watershed Restoration Act (FAWRA) funded projects in the Zuni Mountains. FAWRA funding has been an important bridge for project partners to continue operations on private property during the MSO injunction. Mount Taylor Manufacturing and Forest Fitness LLC have formed a new partnership to treat XX acres on the Weaver property in the Zuni Mountains. Jeremy Hanlon with Forest Fitness LLC noted that they are using hand crews for this project, employing a 30-person crew. A current limitation is having enough trucks to remove material from the project. Warming temperatures and melting snow are contributing to road conditions deteriorating, which will likely impact the project in the coming weeks.

**Designation by prescription (DxP)**

Jason Eakins and Endasha Houston with the Cibola National Forest gave a presentation on a new initiative from the Forest to treat acres using a method known as “Designation by Prescription” (DxP). DxP utilizes GPS and GIS data to create polygons that operators in harvesting equipment can view on tablets. Operators can view the polygons as they move through a treatment unit that designates the prescription they should be following within a unit. This method will potentially replace the practice of painting trees that will either be cut or left. The DxP process is still in a testing phase and not being used at scale in the Zuni Mountains. There was interest in how the use of tablet computers will work in hand thinning areas, where crews won’t be able to simultaneously view tablets while operating a chainsaw.