

# New Mexico Community Land Grants: A Long History of Natural Resource Protection

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New Mexico has a long and unique history of human settlement developed in accordance with the notion that communities should protect the natural environment. This history began with the Native American tribes and pueblos and continued with the Spanish and Mexican community land grants. As land-based people, both Native American and Indo-Hispano settlers held sacred the connection between human beings and their natural surroundings. A community's dependence on the land and all its resources for survival required an understanding of how to utilize the gifts provided by Nature for long-term sustainability rather than short-term gain. Lands granted to families by Spain or Mexico for the establishment of a community were required to have sufficient resources to support not only the founding settlers but future residents as well. For this reason, community land grants always encompassed a watershed that included forested uplands, pasture-

lands, and lowland valleys that could be utilized for agriculture. All community land grants were required to establish an acequia system for the delivery of water to the community and a governing body to ensure the protection of common land, water, and other natural resources. Once established, these land grant communities were highly self-sufficient from 1598 until the early 1900s. The decline in self-sufficiency and community survivability resulted directly from the loss of common lands after the Mexican-American War ended in 1848. At that time, there were 131 Spanish and Mexican land grant communities, which managed over eight million acres of common land. Today there are only about thirty-five active land grant communities, which have struggled to maintain approximately 200,000 acres of common land. The common lands have been lost over the past 161 years to both public and private interests in a variety of ways. About 3.4 million acres became property of the United States, and much of it is managed today by the US Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management. The loss of common land created great economic hardships for land

grant community members, whose entire way of life depended on the land base, and who were forced to leave their homelands in search of other means of survival.

Today, land grant heirs who have remained in their communities of origin still have a strong desire to utilize and protect their former common lands, which are now under the control of the federal government. It is these centuries-old communities that face the biggest risk to life and property when large-scale wildfires burn uncontrollably as a direct result of neglect from federal land management agencies. In recent years, land grant communities have actively tried to work with federal land management agencies to help plan for the administration and care of former common lands. In doing so, community land grant advocates have also begun to engage local and national conservation organizations to establish common goals for management and protection of these public lands. Their intent is to work collaboratively with other organizations to address common concerns and to ensure not only the health of the land but also the protection of their communities and natural resources.

