



# WATER SCARCITY IN THE WEST

## THE SITUATION

In the arid West, we are all connected by rivers; they are the lifeblood of our land, our economy, and our way of life. All western rivers, like the Rio Grande, the Colorado River, and their tributaries, provide water for millions of people and sustain our local food supply. In addition to providing clean water and protection from floods, healthy rivers also support abundant game and wildlife and underlie our multi-billion dollar recreation and tourism economy. When healthy, rivers provide a front-line defense against extreme weather events in an era of climate change.

Unfortunately, the health of these rivers, and the people and wildlife that depend on them, are in jeopardy. The future of our western communities and economies surrounding the rivers are uncertain. As the increasing value of water has outpaced the value of food and land, some farmers have no choice but to sell their water rights away from green river valleys. Many sales transfer water to upstream urban centers, often diminishing streamflows between the cities and rural communities. But, while water scarcity breeds conflict, it also breeds opportunities.

## THE OPPORTUNITY

Audubon believes that people are at the heart of solutions to water scarcity and sustainable water management. Our work to change attitudes about how we use, manage and value water is centered on building trusted relationships and collaborative partnerships to achieve conservation victories at scale.

We accomplish conservation through a multi-pronged strategy of market-based solutions, policy reform, engagement, on-the-ground conservation and education. Our work is grounded in science, in innovation and collaboration. In short, Audubon delivers balanced conservation programming from backyards, to schools, to legislatures.

## AUDUBON'S SOLUTIONS

Where birds thrive, people prosper. Audubon's work is centered on birds because they are a crucial link in the chain of life. The vast distances they travel and exposure to diverse ecosystems make them unique barometers of Earth's health and, here in New Mexico, specifically the health of our rivers. Many of the birds that depend on healthy rivers, streams and springs, like the Yellow-billed Cuckoo and Bell's Vireo, are in decline.



photo by Ken Stinnett

**New Mexico is the 5th largest state but freshwater occupies less than 1% of its land base.**

**The Rio Grande, Colorado River, and their tributaries connect New Mexico to five neighboring states and Mexico. This water is culturally significant to 20 tribes within NM alone.**

**Wildlife concentrates along the state's 6,500 miles of perennial streams with 80% of New Mexico's sensitive fish and wildlife dependent upon the riparian or aquatic habitats in these stream systems at some time in their life cycle.**

**7 National Wildlife Refuges, 5 Wild and Scenic Rivers, 2 National Monuments and 2 National Recreation Areas are located along NM waterways.**

**80% of the state's surface water is diverted for food production, but 97% of food grown in New Mexico is exported for out-of-state consumption.**

**Rivers help sustain New Mexico's tourism and outdoor recreation economies, including birdwatching, generating \$6.1 billion each year.**

**94% of New Mexico voters say the low water level in rivers is a serious problem.**

## OUR CONSERVATION PROGRAMS

**INNOVATIVE WATER MARKETS** with farmers in the Middle and Lower Rio Grande to restore a portion of nature's share of water instream and at key forest and wetland habitat through voluntary, market-based environmental water transactions. Water leasing for streamflow provides many potential benefits to land-owners, including an alternative source of income, flexibility in farm management and operations, a green valley and improved water quality.

**POLICY REFORM** of state and federal appropriations, laws and regulations to increase public funding for water conservation and habitat restoration, to expand the beneficial use of water to fish and wildlife, and to modernize outdated basin wide reservoirs and water infrastructure to maximize flexibility, efficiency, and optimization of water supply, storage, and delivery for use by people and nature.

**GRASSROOTS ENGAGEMENT** of 30,000 westerners who advocate for conservation actions that will increase river flow, enhance the health of the environment, and restore valuable wetlands and forests.

**ON-THE-GROUND HABITAT RESTORATION** in targeted geographies and Important Bird Areas providing local opportunities near homes and communities, and creating personal connections to specific rivers and birds that inspire individuals and groups to take action;

***“Water delivered to the restoration sites will irrigate riparian shrub, woodland, and wetland vegetation—it is still agriculture, but we are just growing something different.”***

Robert Faubion,  
Vice Chair, Board of Elephant Butte Irrigation District



The Festival of the Cranes at Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge contributes more than \$2.2 million to the region's economy. The Rio Grande is key to the health of this refuge.

**RIVER STEWARDSHIP** to protect against new water development and trans-basin diversions, like the Gila River, where non-diversion alternatives like water conservation, efficiency, reuse and watershed conservation can secure a future water supply for a fraction of a cost;

**K-12 SCIENCE-BASED, ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION PROGRAMS** that combine discovery, investigation, and outdoor exploration with an emphasis on the importance of birds and their role as indicators of environmental health and a changing climate;

**CITIZEN SCIENCE PROJECTS** that monitor birds and collect data - the Christmas Bird Count, Great Backyard Bird Count, and Climate Watch - inform conservation science and help answer profound questions about climate change and its impact on our natural resources.

## HOW YOU CAN HELP

Acknowledging that water is life, we are calling on the philanthropic community to elevate water conservation as a funding priority. We invite you to become an integral partner in mitigating the effects of climate change and water scarcity in the west by investing in Audubon New Mexico's programs and on-the-ground efforts.

For more information or to find out about how to support Audubon, contact:

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**Sustaining Water for Birds and People**

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