Wildlife and Riparian Corridors in the Upper Rio Grande

Executive Summary

Wildlife and riparian corridors are pathways and waterways that provide food, water, and habitat; they are vital to the survival of the plants, animals, and local communities that thrive along their undisturbed channels. The Upper Rio Grande Corridor is one of these channels which stretches from Colorado to Arizona, and is in need of protection from man-made obstructions and barriers that fragment corridors such as major highways and construction projects. We have an opportunity to support communities that depend on these natural lands for their way of life, and we have an obligation to save the vulnerable plants and animals in the U.S. Southwest that depend on these corridors.

These plants and animals account for some of the greatest at-risk wildlife of the one-third of U.S. species that are already classified as at risk or endangered. By supporting the bipartisan Recovering America’s Wildlife Act, we can allocate $1.4 billion dollars in annual funding to restore habitat, recover wildlife populations, and rebuild the infrastructure for both our natural systems and outdoor recreation opportunities associated with corridors like the Upper Rio Grande. By supporting the America the Beautiful Initiative which sets out a decade-long challenge to pursue conservation of thirty percent of public lands and waters by 2030 through a locally led and voluntary, nationwide effort to connect, and restore lands, waters, and wildlife, we can secure these corridors. By supporting the Wildlife Corridors Conservation Act, we can also facilitate the creation of a National Wildlife Corridor System and provide for the designation and management of such corridors on federal land and water. It is necessary to safeguard our climate, our wildlife, and the communities that are connected to these areas from peril that we act now.

Challenge

More than four million miles of roads connect almost 330 million people in the United States. Humans rely on these corridors to facilitate migration and enable the commerce that allows our species to thrive. Likewise, wildlife requires corridors. Wildlife corridors are pathways or routes that connect habitat and are key for wildlife survival. These areas foster seasonal movement, between summer and winter range. They are critical for wildlife to find mates to ensure genetic diversity. Migration routes increasingly are also used for wildlife seeking new habitat because of natural disasters or climate change. Wildlife corridors also include aquatic linkages, which allow fish and other species to move freely through watersheds.


Many local communities depend on the land, water, and wildlife in the Upper Rio Grande Valley for their way of life. These communities understand the importance of preserving wildlife so that future generations can enjoy hiking, fishing, hunting, camping, bird watching and many other recreational activities in the region which make up their way of life. Additionally, Native American tribes play an important role in protecting wildlife connectivity and corridors in the Upper Rio Grande. Some key habitat for fostering wildlife connectivity is under tribal management. Many tribal natural resource officers are collaring animals and collecting data that is critical to understanding species movement.

The current legal and regulatory status of riparian corridors is a shallow patchwork of laws and regulations which does not make easy work of preserving these lands and waters. In some cases, the only explicit policies supporting riparian corridor protection and restoration in the Upper Rio Grande are found within impermanent

$1.4 B
Money from Recovering America's Wildlife Act meant for habitat restoration, and other wildlife recovery efforts

2030
Target year to achieve protection of 30% of all U.S. public lands and waterways
Supporting riparian corridor protection and restoration in the Upper Rio Grande are found within impermanent federal and state resource management plans, which guide and place sideboards on resource management decisions but seldom mandate action or offer long-term or permanent protections. Much of the Upper Rio Grande includes national forests managed by the U.S. Forest Service, while other public lands (generally at lower elevations) are managed by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM). On private lands, riparian habitat policy is embedded in public and private incentives such as federal agricultural conservation programs and conservation easements. Wildlife doesn't recognize state lines, forest service boundaries or tribal borders. For any wildlife corridor policy to be effective, it must transcend jurisdictional boundaries and involve active engagement from key stakeholders including federal and state agencies, tribes, private landowners, local communities, and non-governmental groups.

Riparian corridors provide essential habitat elements—food, water, shelter, nesting and breeding areas, to name a few. In New Mexico, 80 percent of all vertebrates use riparian areas for at least half their life cycles; more than half of these are totally dependent on riparian areas. In turn, terrestrial and riparian habitat corridors are interdependent: diverse species of wildlife rely upon the food, shelter, and water obtained in riparian zones, and the rivers and streams require riparian zones for filtering out pollutants and creating habitat for fish and other aquatic species.

**Solution**

There are several solutions to pursue in order to help protect the Upper Rio Grande’s riparian and wildlife corridors. Science and best land management practices must be shared with all partners and used to guide corridor decisions for the Upper Rio Grande’s iconic wildlife to thrive and flourish for generations to come. The construction of wildlife overpasses and underpasses can prevent vehicle collisions, developers and energy companies can be incentivized to create outside of migration corridors, and ranchers can be encouraged to install wildlife-friendly fences. Wildlife and waterways hold intrinsic and economic value, they feed and sustain millions of Americans each year, drives tourism in many places, and reminds us that wild places still exist. At a moral and legal level, identifying and conserving wildlife and riparian corridors is necessary. Conserving thirty percent of our lands and waters by 2030 is a necessary step in protecting the Upper Rio Grande Corridor, as is investing $1.4 billion annually in wildlife recovery efforts and recreation, and creating a National Wildlife Corridor System to designate and manage corridors on federal lands and waters.

**Policy Recommendations**

- America the Beautiful Initiative - An executive campaign that calls for the locally led conservation of thirty percent of U.S. lands and waters by 2030