



News Release

**Big Bend National Park
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
U.S. Geological Survey**

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BIG BEND CONSERVATION COOPERATIVE WORKS WITH PARTNERS TO ENHANCE THE RIO GRANDE AND LOCAL GRASSLANDS

During a tour of Big Bend National Park this weekend, Assistant Secretary of the Interior for Water and Science Anne Castle highlighted the Big Bend Conservation Cooperative's efforts to conserve the Rio Grande watershed as a model of the kind of partnership that is the foundation of President Obama's America's Great Outdoors Rivers Initiative.

"One of the primary goals of the America's Great Outdoors initiative is to work with communities to conserve our land and water, reconnect people with nature, and strengthen local economies through outdoor recreation and tourism," Castle said. "The Big Bend Conservation Cooperative has set an admirable example by fostering increased coordination among federal and state agencies, non-governmental organizations, academic institutions, and private landowners."

The purpose of the Initiative is to recognize, conserve, and enhance America's rivers and provide opportunities for Americans to connect with their outdoor resources and natural heritage. The Big Bend Conservation Cooperative is led by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), National Park Service (NPS), U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), and Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD), and includes more than 30 participating organizations together with state and local partners to support conservation efforts that benefit communities, outdoor recreationists, and native plants, fish, and wildlife.

"Our vision for the Rio Grande watershed includes healthy rivers and grasslands that benefit people and wildlife," said Dr. Benjamin Tuggle, FWS Southwest Regional Director. "We are reaching out to people in every sector of society to help us identify and accomplish shared goals related to this vision. At a time when we face daunting threats to ecosystems and the human and wildlife communities they support, significant improvements can only be made if we all work together."

From bighorn sheep at the top of rugged mountains to Rio Grande silvery minnows at the bottom of the Rio Grande, there is a diverse array of plants, fish, and wildlife that depend on the grasslands, mountains, rivers, creeks, and springs of the Chihuahuan Desert. Participants in the Big Bend

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Conservation Cooperative are working together across land management boundaries and with conservation partners in Mexico to leverage resources and to increase the effectiveness of conservation and restoration efforts in this area. Participating agencies also provide technical assistance and funding for voluntary conservation projects on private lands through programs such as the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program and Texas Parks and Wildlife Department's Landowner Incentive Program.

Participants in the Big Bend Conservation Cooperative have successfully implemented projects resulting in conservation of the region's precious natural resources. Projects have included the control of exotic species such as saltcedar and giant river cane along the Rio Grande; re-introduction of the endangered Rio Grande silvery minnow, pronghorn antelope, and big horn sheep; and the restoration of grassland, wetland, and riparian habitats on public and private lands. For example, over the past year, participants in the Big Bend Conservation Cooperative have worked with partners to initiate or complete the following within the Rio Grande watershed:

- Restoration of more than 6,800 acres of grassland habitats;
- Restoration of more than 500 acres of riparian habitats associated with the Rio Grande, creeks, and wetlands;
- Restoration of more than 70 acres of wetland habitats;
- Leveraging of funds from the Commission for Environmental Cooperation, the Desert Landscape Conservation Cooperative, the Rio Grande Joint Venture, and the National Fish Habitat Partnership for local habitat restoration projects, science, and monitoring that will inform and improve conservation efforts.

During her visit, Castle met with personnel from the NPS, FWS, and USGS, and researchers from Sul Ross State University and the University of Texas – Pan Am who demonstrated on-going restoration projects as well as science and monitoring efforts that are providing information needed to enhance management of the Rio Grande and Chihuahuan Desert grasslands. The group also discussed hosting public meetings and a river clean up event this Fall to further engage local citizens and gather input on ways to improve and advance conservation efforts.

“The goals of the Big Bend Conservation Cooperative include bringing more grass, birds, and wildlife to the uplands and creating a healthier Rio Grande with improved water quality, diverse habitats, and an increased channel capacity to reduce flooding in communities along the river,” said Jeff Bennett, Physical Scientist for Big Bend National Park. “This will benefit the public by improving ecosystem services for local citizens and enhancing the natural beauty of the Big Bend region for those eager to enjoy the many recreational opportunities on our public lands.”

“Science and monitoring play an important role in helping land owners and natural resource managers understand how to better conserve ecosystems,” said Bob Joseph, Director of the USGS's Texas Water Science Center. “The USGS is working with our partners to help monitor the effects of management actions and provide the science necessary to reduce uncertainty. This allows our partners to make informed decisions that are more likely to result in successful outcomes.”

For example, science and monitoring efforts have made significant contributions to natural resource managers' understanding of the Big Bend reach of Rio Grande and how it has dramatically narrowed in size, creating a very different array of aquatic and riparian habitats than existed in the mid-20th century.

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The riverine ecosystem is degrading and only large summer and fall flows restore the river channel attributes that are needed for a properly functioning and resilient ecosystem.

“Rehabilitation of the Rio Grande requires understanding the delicate balance between river flows and sediment that is transported through the river corridor,” said Jack Schmidt, Chief of the USGS Grand Canyon Monitoring and Research Center, who is working cooperatively with the USGS Texas Water Science Center and other partners to better understand the dynamics of the river. “The USGS is leading efforts to measure the stream flows and associated sediment transport that are fundamental to understanding how the river has changed and how it can be restored.”

In addition to other federal and state agencies, such as the International Boundary and Water Commission, Bureau of Reclamation, the Natural Resources Conservation Service, the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality, the Texas Water Development Board, and Texas Agri-Life Extension Service, the Big Bend Conservation Cooperative includes participants from academia, including researchers and students from Sul Ross State University’s Rio Grande Research Center and Borderlands Research Institute, Utah State University, the University of Texas, Texas Tech University, Texas State University, and Texas A&M University. Other participants include non-governmental organizations such as World Wildlife Fund, the Nature Conservancy, the Trans Pecos Water and Land Trust, Environmental Defense Fund, Cuenca los Ojos Foundation, Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory, the Rio Grande Institute, and the Chihuahuan Desert Research Institute. Corporations such as El Carmen Land and Conservation Company, CEMEX, and Coca Cola have also made significant contributions to conservation in the region. In addition, the Big Bend Conservation Cooperative is working with a wide array of federal, state, and local partners on the Mexican side of the Rio Grande watershed under an effort known as the Big Bend-Río Bravo Initiative.

“In nature, each species plays its part in a healthy and resilient ecosystem,” said Aimee Roberson, FWS Biologist and Project Leader for the America’s Great Outdoors Rivers Initiative – Rio Grande Watershed Project. “We are taking a cue from nature and how ecosystems function as we work together to accomplish shared conservation goals. We are creating a synergy that is greater than the sum of our collective efforts if we were acting alone.”

MORE INFORMATION ON AMERICA’S GREAT OUTDOORS INITIATIVE

President Obama launched the America’s Great Outdoors Initiative [<http://americasgreatoutdoors.gov/>] to develop a conservation and recreation agenda built for the 21st century. As part of the Initiative, Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar selected projects in every state that are among the best investments in the nation to support a healthy, active population, conserve wildlife and working lands, and create travel, tourism and outdoor-recreation jobs across the country.

Salazar also highlighted a list of 51 river projects, one in each state and the District of Columbia, to serve as models for communities wishing to conserve and restore hometown rivers, expand outdoor recreational opportunities and support jobs in local communities.

Interior Department agencies – including the National Park Service, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the U.S. Geological Survey, the Bureau of Land Management, and the Bureau of Reclamation – are working with states, tribes, local communities, and conservation and recreation organizations to support America’s Great Outdoors projects by leveraging existing resources and technical support.

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By promoting outdoor recreation, the America's Great Outdoors initiative also is helping boost the nation's economy by supporting vital jobs and economic benefits to communities across the country. The Outdoor Industry Association estimates recreational activities including hiking, camping, and fishing contribute \$646 billion to the U.S. economy, supporting more than 6 million jobs.

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