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New Reforestation Center will help forests and communities recover after wildfires

Collaboration between EMNRD and higher education institutions will invest in climate-smart tree seedling production

SANTA FE, NM – The Energy, Minerals and Natural Resources Department (EMNRD) is proud to announce the establishment of a first-of-its-kind reforestation center in New Mexico. A Memorandum of Agreement between EMNRD and three state universities -- New Mexico Highlands University, New Mexico State University, and University of New Mexico was signed on Friday, January 7, 2022 following several years of effort to address the reforestation needs of areas burned by severe wildfires. Filling the current backlog of burned areas requires more than 300 million seedlings – but the current tree nursery capacity can only grow 300,000 seedlings per year. The New Mexico Reforestation Center is needed to coordinate, develop, and invest in climate-smart tree seedling production of up to 5 million trees per year, along with workforce training and research to ensure trees planted today will survive in the future climate.

The New Mexico Reforestation Center leverages the strengths of three higher education institutions and state government experience to create a powerful new collaboration. New Mexico Highlands University is leading the development and delivery of reforestation education and workforce development. New Mexico State University is leading the nursery operations and seedling research. The University of New Mexico is developing predictive models to increase planted seedling survival in warmer and drier conditions. Finally, EMNRD's Forestry Division will coordinate seed collection and storage and tree planting logistics.

"The New Mexico Reforestation Center builds on two decades of work at the John T. Harrington Forestry Research Center in Mora," said New Mexico State University Chancellor Dan Arvizu, "and New Mexico State University is excited to contribute expertise growing climate-adapted seedlings."

"The University of New Mexico, Biology Department, has developed models to ensure the right tree is planted in the right place, at the right time," said Vice-President for Research Ellen Fisher. "The Reforestation Center will use these models to plant trees where seedling survival will be highest."

"A skilled forestry workforce is necessary to plant the seedlings grown by the Reforestation Center," said New Mexico Highlands University President Sam Minner. "Our students and faculty will be training the next generation of tree planters and foresters."

"The new Reforestation Center will increase the number of acres planted each year, which in turn contributes to healthy watersheds and climate change resiliency," said Energy, Minerals and Natural Resources Department Secretary Sarah Cottrell Propst. "The Forestry Division is responsible for reforestation, and the new Center will allow us to scale up our work to meet the current and future needs of our state."

Senator Pat Woods pre-filed the New Mexico Reforestation Center Act that makes an appropriation of $4.6 million to the Center. The appropriation is for operating expenses to start the seed collection and design process to construct the needed nursery facilities. Without this appropriation of state funding the Center will be dependent on federal dollars in a proposed reforestation program in the Build Back Better Act that is stalled in Congress.

"The New Mexico Reforestation Center is a strong example of what can be accomplished when our colleges and universities work collaboratively on a complex problem," said Higher Education Department Secretary Stephanie Rodriguez. "Reforesting areas burned by wildfire is an emerging need and priority. New Mexico is on the leading edge by leveraging the expertise of three universities with some of the best programs and research in the nation to develop innovative solutions."

EMNRD looks forward to working with our partners to make the Reforestation Center a success.