

# Post-disaster Funding: A Case Study in Adaptive Framing

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by

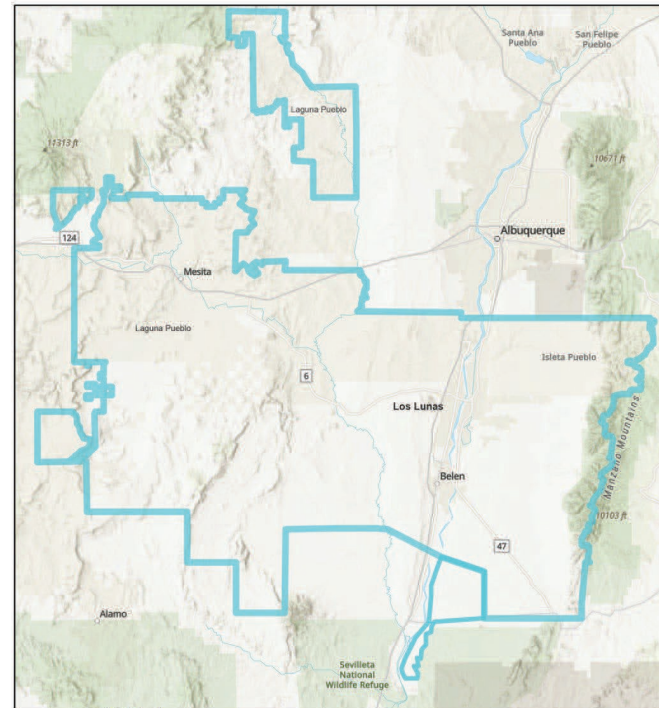
Teresa Smith de Cherif

Chair, Board of Supervisors

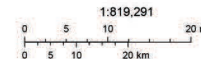
Valencia Soil and Water Conservation District

# Valencia Soil and Water Conservation District

VALENCIA SOIL and WATER CONSERVATION DISTRICT AREA MAP



5/15/2025



Esri, CGIAR, USGS, Sources: Esri, TomTom, Garmin, FAO, NOAA, USGS, © OpenStreetMap contributors, and the GIS User Community

Valencia SWCD boundaries (with the southern most boundary approximated by the District).



**VALENCIA SOIL and WATER CONSERVATION DISTRICT  
BOARD of SUPERVISORS**

**Chair:** Teresa Smith de Cherif<sup>1</sup>

**Vice Chair:** Richard Bonine, Jr.,<sup>2</sup> Pueblo of Laguna Representative

**Treasurer:** Pam Cordova<sup>3</sup>

**Supervisor:** Nick Baca<sup>4</sup>

**Supervisor:** James Fischer<sup>5</sup>

**Supervisor:** Rodney Jones,<sup>6</sup> Pueblo of Isleta Representative

**Supervisor:** Eugene Pickett<sup>7</sup>



Autumn colors at Whitfield. Photo by Linda Helzer

<sup>1</sup> Position 4. Start date: April 2008. | <sup>2</sup> Position 7. Start date: January 2016. | <sup>3</sup> Position 5. Start date: February 2023. | <sup>4</sup> Position 1. Start date: January 2024. | <sup>5</sup> Position 3. Start date: January 2024.  
<sup>6</sup> Position 6. Start date: January 2025. | <sup>7</sup> Position 2. Start date: January 2025.

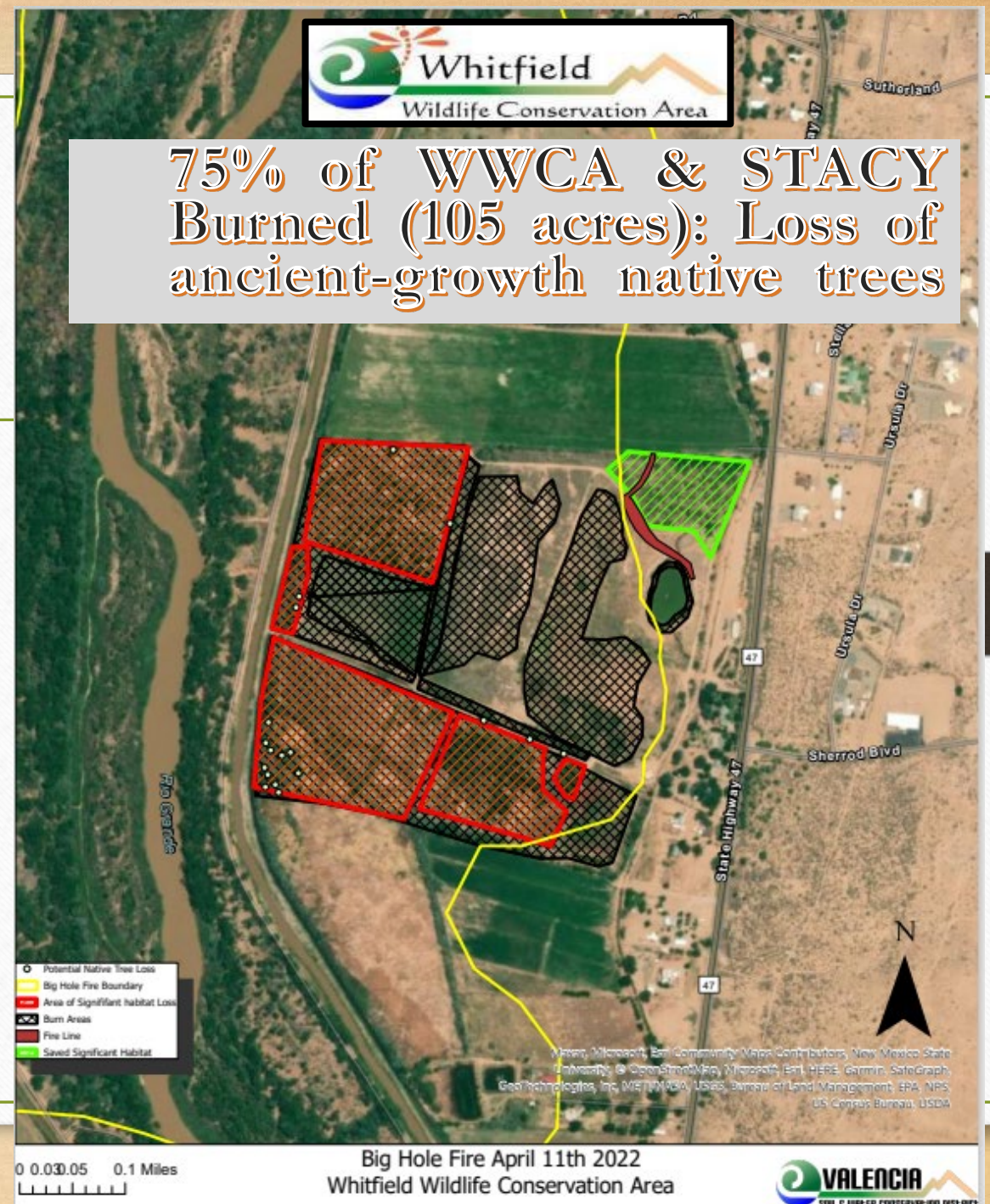


# BIG HOLE FIRE --April 11<sup>th</sup>, 2022-- +800 Acres

Valencia County's biggest bosque fire (and only fire ever included in a federal emergency declaration)(DR-4652) within Valencia County)



Rio Abajo Conservation Area (3 miles south of WWCA)



75% of WWCA & STACY Burned (105 acres): Loss of ancient-growth native trees



# Valencia Soil and Water Conservation District: April 11, 2022--Big Hole Fire at Whitfield



# Current and future climate scenarios

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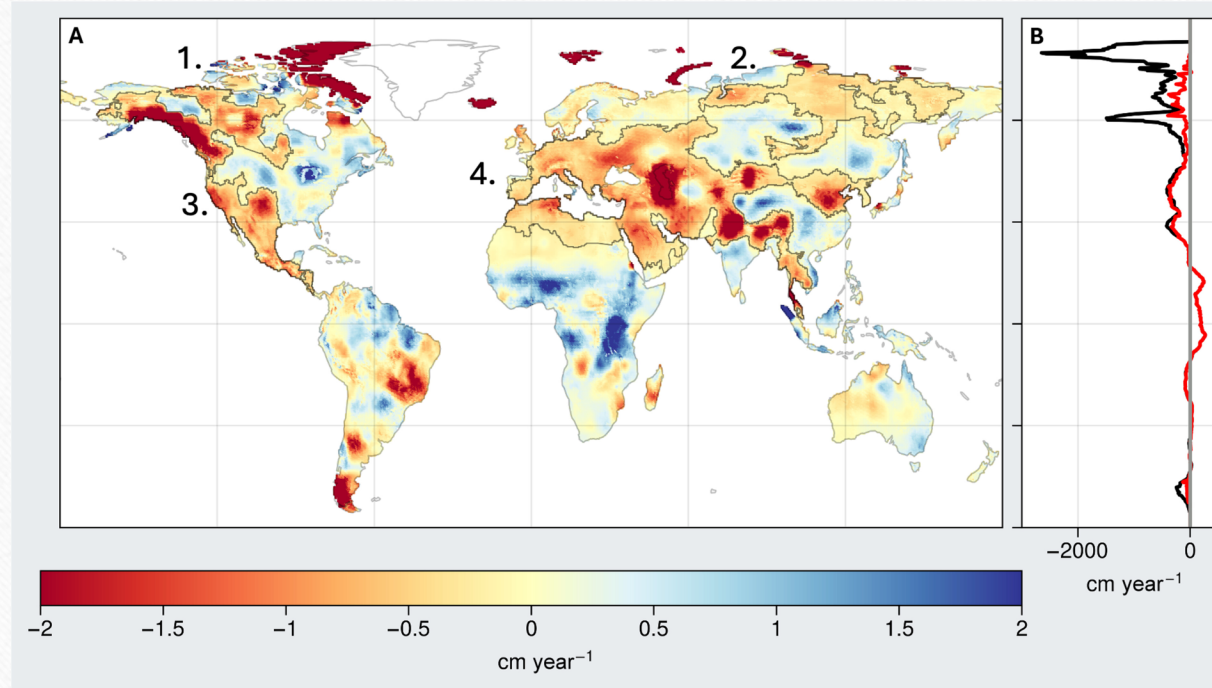
“Climate change is driving profound changes within the Earth system, including to its water cycle. While **global temperatures continue to reach record heights**, with the year 2024 being the hottest year in the past 175 years, **the planet is experiencing increasing extremes of flooding and drought**, widespread glacial and ice sheet melt and sea level rise (6–8), **and greater risk of wildfire** and biodiversity loss.”

“Areas experiencing drying increased by twice the size of California annually, creating ‘mega-drying’ regions across the Northern Hemisphere. While most of the world’s dry/wet areas continue to get drier/wetter, dry areas are now drying faster than wet areas are wetting.”

H.A. Chandanpurkar, J.S. Famiglietti, et al, “Unprecedented continental drying, shrinking freshwater availability, and increasing land contributions to sea level rise,” *Science Advances*, 25 July 2025, Vol. 11, Issue 30, as accessed at <https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/sciadv.adx0298>, September 30, 2025.



# One of four mega drought regions: southwestern USA



# More Fire?

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1. The question is when, *not if*.
2. The next question is will there be sufficient groundwater or river water (terrestrial water storage) to respond to fires.
3. Yet another questions is how does one recover?



In the aftermath of fire, there are immediate recovery and mitigation needs...

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- ...including increased staffing
- There are capacity building grants available.
- The Land of Enchantment/Legacy Fund provided 10 months of salary and benefits for a Conservation Program Assistant.
- The Youth Conservation Corps funded a crew of 7 for 6 months, every year since the Big Hole Fire.

# Before restoration begins

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- There may be **many years of recovery and mitigation**.
- Our Conservation Program Assistant wrapped up most of the recovery and mitigation at the end of Fiscal Year 2025.
- We had to request additional **assistance from NM State Forestry** and from the local **Prison Labor Crew**.



# Federal Disaster Declaration: DR-4652

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- Valencia SWCD was the only entity that applied for disaster funding after the Big Hole Fire of April 11, 2022.
- Economic Development Administration [EDA (Department of Commerce)]: **EDA-DISASTER-2023, FY 2023 EDA Disaster Supplemental**
- Generally, EDA grants require a cost-share of funds (not in kind). For disasters, expect to contribute 20 percent, sometimes just 10 percent.
- EDA is the same agency that funds regional economic planning (MRCOG).
- EDA is slated for death by DOGE, perhaps as early as next year.

# The application: A Sisyphean task?

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- ED-900, General Application for EDA Programs; PER (the Preliminary Engineering Report); Environmental Narrative; Archaeological Resources; Alternatives; Letters of Support; Project Timetable; Certified Audit; Project Management Plan; and more---purposefully difficult?
- Where would you start?



# ED-900: B. Scope of Work

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- B.1: Describe the scope of work for the proposed EDA investment, including a list of project tasks to be undertaken.
- B.2: Describe the specific deliverables that the project will produce and the primary beneficiaries or audience of those deliverables. Please note that deliverables are defined as the specific outcomes that will come from the project and differ from information on project tasks/activities requested in B.1. Project tasks/activities requested in B.1 should be reported as process steps that will be achieved to reach the final project while deliverables/outcomes detailed in B.2 are the final product produced.

# STOP: Define the goals and objectives

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- The instructions for B.1 indicted categories of assistance: construction, planning, or a revolving loan fund.
- We wanted a federal disaster grant to invest in cleaning up our disaster: Bosque Restoration. **Planning?** **Construction?** **Revolving loan fund?**
- Funds for recovery, mitigation, and restoration required a re-examination of our needs vs. the funding agency's objectives.



# FRAMING

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- MISSION: “The Valencia Soil and Water Conservation District provides education, technical assistance, and recognition to current and future land stewards in the conservation of natural resources, including water, soil, plants, and wildlife.”
- Jorge Ayala, Regional Director of EDA (Austin), comes to visit, walks 1.1-mile perimeter trail, in a dark suit on a hot day, one that matched the color of the landscape before him. A quiet man, he was taking it all in, when suddenly he whispered to me, at the westernmost part of our conservation area...

# “We could build you that building.”

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- We couldn't get funds to develop a plant list for a hot and drier climate to restore Whitfield, but we could get complete the infrastructure projects we had long imagined and planned.
- We could get: our Phase 2 administrative and operations building, accessibility improvements, a wildlife observation deck; a 2-room office for researchers in the second floor of our maintenance building.
- Because we were “overmatched” with some Capital Outlay funds, we had to imagine more.



# Two more components

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- A loggia for the Phase 2 building to provide outdoor meeting space/outdoor classroom
- Dual-purpose irrigation infrastructure and solar-powered greenhouse with teaching gardens

Our grant request title:

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- *Building economic resiliency in the aftermath of the Big Hole Fire*



# Read directions carefully for clues on framing!

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- Our desired Phase 2 building became the Operations and Economic Development building (OED). We had moved our administrative office into the visitor and education center (Phase 1), so...
- The OED will return the Visitor and Education Center (VEC) to its intended use, to develop ecotourism and outreach (while continuing outdoor education)...With increased capacity in the VEC, the District can offer more ecotourism events, including its envisioned Middle Rio Grande birding trek among [refuges to the north and south].

# OED Deliverables

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- A. frequent and robust ecotourism revenue
- Union workforce and registered apprenticeships in the building's construction
- Workforce training in climate-adapted sustainable agriculture, and technical assistance workshops in soil and water conservation techniques, regenerative agriculture, and healthy soils to maintain green spaces and develop climate-resilient agricultural sectors of the economy.
- Inclusivity for tribal members.



# Learn a foreign language

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- Learn how to tell your story within the box the grantor constructed for you AND speak the grantor's language.
- “Describe how the proposed project aligns with one or more of EDA's investment priorities.”
- Our project aligned with Equity, Recovery and Resilience, Workforce Development, and Environmentally Sustainable Development in Green Places

# Recovery and Resilience

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- “Building irrigation infrastructure will make District conservation lands and surrounding areas more resilient to natural disasters. The irrigation and greenhouse infrastructure will allow the 43-acre Stacy Unit to recover from the Big Hole Fire that burned 75% of that land. Once this aspect of the overall project is completed, Stacy lands will be open for jobs training in sustainable agriculture. The project will increase commercialization of locally grown food for consumers within the District, and will be a source for regionally sourced food and climate-adapted vegetation for the Albuquerque, Santa Fe, and Taos markets, leading to long-term economic resilience.” [continues]



# Recovery and Resilience, cont'd

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- “Training will also be offered on how to transform locally grown food into value-added agriculture. Because the irrigation infrastructure can be accessed by local fire fighters, it will also protect the economic investments of nearby businesses and residences. The irrigation well and concrete ditch can be used to wet down or even flood the Stacy Unit in the event of wildfire, thereby reducing the vulnerability of public and private lands visited by natural disaster.”

# Environmentally Sustainable Development in Green Places

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- “Training at the Stacy garden and greenhouse will include: soil and water conservation techniques to grow a vibrant local food economy in a future of increasing drought, temperature, and aridity, and flooding; cultivating climate-adapted food and fire-resistant plants for recovery and resilient restoration, native seed banks, and climate-adapted food, leading to business expansion in rural agriculture.”

[continues]



# Environmentally Sustainable Development in Green Places:

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- “Teaching and demonstrating soil and water conservation techniques, regenerative agriculture, and healthy soils are important climate resiliency tools in the agriculture sector of the desert southwest. Healthy soils teeming with living organisms are water reservoirs that capture heavy rainfall with little run-off, as water seeps into the soil and eventually finds its way to recharging groundwater. The project’s climate resilient training will directly contribute to decreasing the risk of catastrophic flooding in the District, especially as healthy soils become a part of flood mitigation.”

# Foreign Language, part 2

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- Know your audience to know your language.
- Most EDA staff are engineers.
- If you don't think like or write like an engineer, speak to your grantor's designated lead. There is always one in a post-disaster setting. Learn her/his language, and take notes.



# Research and statistics: Know your community

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- What is the area of impact—identify by description and by census tract number.
- What are the populations within the geographies of your community?
- Are there underserved communities within geographies that are persistent poverty counties and tribal lands?
- Socorro and Cibola counties have 28% and 32.5% of their respective populations living in poverty over the last 30 years.

# Research and statistics: Know your community cont'd

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- Of the estimated District population of 84,794, 49.53% are Hispanic, 11.14% are Native American, 3.48% are other persons of color, 1.07% are Black or African American, and 0.0099% are Asian, Pacific Islander, or Native Hawaiian.
- *This project will improve their economic conditions with union jobs, inclusivity via removing transportation barriers, and by being an economic driver in agriculture, ecotourism, and entrepreneurship.*



# Research and statistics: Know your community cont'd

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- Ecotourism: Jobs are a deliverable. What kinds of jobs might result from increased visitation to Whitfield (ecotourism)?
- Economic data reveal the spillover effect of events: Folks stop for lunch, buy gas and goodies from gas stations and convenience stores, go shopping, or buy “merch” from local vendors at the event.
- **IMAGINATION, FIELD WORK, and MATH REQUIRED:** Get out and talk to local businesses and earn their support. Then begin to calculate the possible jobs the project might create.

## Be a good neighbor/member of your community

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- Work together where you can.
- Support others.
- If and when you ask for a letter of support for your project, you'll have it.
- Don't ask at the last minute.
- Do provide a courtesy draft letter, relevant to that person or organization.



# Facts matter.

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- Bragging rights: earned accomplishments not vacuous claims.
- NEVER use “this is a just cause...” What does that mean?
- Know your facts: Valencia SWCD awarded NM SWCD of the year in 2023; approved by federal, state, and local authorities, and 2 Pueblos as a new signatory to the Middle Rio Grande Endangered Species Collaborative; holds substantial land in conservation (279 acres) along the Middle Rio Grande—unique among the 47 SWCDs in NM; leads in Soil Health Champions (20) among all SWCDs in NM; Whitfield featured in *Birding Hotspots of Central New Mexico* and described by *Only in New Mexico* as NM’s “hidden nature park that adults and children will love exploring.” Whitfield voted Best Outdoor Recreation Area/Nature Park by readers of the *Valencia County News-Bulletin* in Dec. 2024.

# Results?

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- **\$2,110,000 grant from EDA**, without reductions in the requested amount of funding.
- More grants were funded *because that grant was funded...*



# Thank you for this opportunity to share our experience.

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- Valencia Soil and Water Conservation District

[www.valenciaswcd-nm.gov](http://www.valenciaswcd-nm.gov)

Social media: Facebook, Valencia Soil & Water Conservation District, Whitfield Education Programs, East Valencia Urban Gardens, Friends of Whitfield.