

# Middle Rio Grande/Albuquerque Urban Waters Federal Partnership

*Albuquerque, New Mexico*

## **2024-2029 Work Plan**

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## Background

The Middle Rio Grande/Albuquerque (MRG/ABQ) Urban Waters Partnership in the greater Albuquerque area of New Mexico was established in 2014 as one of 21 partnership locations. Like many western river ecosystems, the Middle Rio Grande faces numerous challenges in balancing competing needs within a finite water supply and other resource constraints. Historical practices by our ancestors and immigrants to the Middle Rio Grande have established the conditions that we have inherited. Ongoing aridification and long-term drought are shifting environmental conditions in ways that impact natural and human communities as we strive to protect our precious Rio Grande. The needs of a growing populace must be met while still preserving natural systems, the agricultural economy, and the cultural practices of Pueblos and villages up and down the valley.

From its inception in 2014 until March of 2019, local representatives from the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and US Fish and Wildlife Service, coordinated the MRG/ABQ Urban Waters Partnership (the Partnership) as co-leads. During this time, quarterly meetings served as a venue for partners to report out about the status of their various projects and become familiar with each other's work. After a number of years operating in this way, this initial goal of building relationships among the partners was accomplished and it became necessary for the Partnership to re-evaluate community value of the group.

In March of 2019, the MRG/ABQ partners and stakeholders for a strategic planning session to determine if and how the Partnership should continue. The group agreed that the Partnership still held great potential value, and decided on an expanded leadership structure in the form of a steering committee that would represent the variety of stakeholders involved.

## Vision

The vision for the national Urban Waters Partnership program is to “restore urban water quality, revitalize our communities and reconnect communities to their urban waterways,” particularly those that are overburdened or economically distressed. The strategy for pursuing this vision in each partnership location is to improve coordination among federal agencies, local government and municipalities, non-profits, educational institutions, and other community-led groups to integrate efforts at a local level.

In March of 2019, the Partnership hosted a strategic planning meeting that marked a shift in the vision and structure of the Partnership. In July 2019, the Steering Committee launched the new “Project Incubator” and the “Success Story” model, which is described below:

### **“Project Incubator” Model:**

- Function as an interdisciplinary think-tank
- Help to successfully launch new projects

- Help existing projects overcome challenges
- Connect projects to the correct resources and people
- Serve as a networking hub

**“Success Story” Model:**

- Demonstrate successes and challenges from projects
- Provide a roadmap or examples for future projects
- Highlight the work being done in the watershed

Under this model, unless a walk-and-talk tour is being held at an Urban Waters partner project site, the Partnership meetings will all follow the same format, allowing the Partnership to highlight partner projects throughout the year. At each meeting, the Ambassador will work to feature four different partner project presentations: one partner to share a “Success Story” of a recently completed project, followed by three partners to present new or existing “Incubator Projects” and facilitate a collaborative think-tank session following their presentation.

The “Project Incubator” and “Success Story” presentation models are intended to facilitate collaboration, provide a lift to urban water-related project ideas, and highlight existing work in the watershed so that collective lessons learned and project ideas are more broadly shared across partner groups.

The Partnership meeting format is outlined below:

**Partnership Meeting Agenda**

Quarterly meetings hosted by the Middle Rio Grande/Albuquerque Urban Waters Partnership will either take the form of a walk-and-talk tour, followed by project-focused or professional networking opportunities, or the following format:

1. Ambassador and Steering Committee welcome and meeting norms
2. “Success Story” presentation, using a provided PowerPoint template (5-7 min)
3. “Project Incubator” presentations, using a provided PowerPoint template (5-7 min each)
4. Break-out sessions: attendees choose an incubator project and join for a think-tank session (~45 min)
5. Re-group: share break-out session outcomes
6. Partner announcements, updates, and networking needs
7. Built-in networking time to close the meeting

Based on the outcomes of the March 2019 strategic planning meeting, the Steering Committee and the Ambassador led a visioning workshop to establish a distinct niche for the Partnership to support in our community. Many of the MRG/ABQ Urban Waters partners collaborate outside of the Partnership, and the Steering Committee wanted to establish the Urban Waters Partnership meetings as a unique and useful way for the partners to collaborate, rather than becoming redundant.

The inspiration for the “Project Incubator” and “Success Story” models came from the realization that some of the greatest past successes of the Partnership occurred during the informal networking time after the quarterly meetings ended, when partners made connections or shared resources that resulted in a project moving forward or overcoming challenges. The question became: How can the Partnership intentionally facilitate this type of synergistic collaboration? The vision became to design Partnership meetings to harness the collaborative power that exists when so many diverse stakeholders are in one room, to provide a platform for partners to ask for specific types of support, and to give partners an opportunity to engage with their colleagues to help move their project forward. The “Project Incubator” model will continue to be developed and refined, but the concept has received positive feedback and interest from both the local community of partners and the national Urban Waters Partnership network.

## Themes and Goals

The MRG/ABQ Urban Waters partnership initially used the mission, vision, and principles of the national Urban Waters Federal Partnership to guide their work. During the March 2019 strategic planning meeting, participants added to, refined and restructured these principles to establish local goals for the Partnership. The goals are organized under four distinct core program themes. A project can be designated as an “Urban Waters project” if it corresponds with at least two of the following four themes:

### **Theme 1: Invest in Healthy Watersheds**

- Promote landscape level conservation and restoration
- Utilize green infrastructure to manage stormwater
- Emphasize everyone’s role in watershed stewardship: government, private, public, individual
- Maximize natural infrastructure for healthy ecosystems
- Measure results for future initiatives
- Support reliable and strong water utilities
  - Expand and stretch water supplies
  - Transform wastewater into a resource
  - Pursue alternative funding and financing models
  - Incorporate environmental capacity into utility planning

### **Theme 2: Engage in Education and Outreach**

- Engage with and hear voices from the community around watershed issues
- Encourage education and engagement opportunities for all ages and audiences
- Utilize community science for ecosystem monitoring and watershed restoration
- Enhance community capacity to engage in water planning and governance
- Encourage programs and events that help community members access, understand and appreciate their urban waterways

- Educate local governments on ordinance updates and how zoning changes can support Urban Waters initiatives

### **Theme 3: Facilitate Economic Revitalization and Prosperity**

- Foster community capacity to adapt and withstand drought, extreme weather, and other environmental stressors.
- Promote and invest in tourism, outdoor recreation, and conservation jobs
- Encourage youth employment and training opportunities
- Utilize green infrastructure to mitigate urban heat islands and revitalize neighborhoods
- Encourage integration of water stewardship in corporate and agency strategies, establishing water stewardship as an essential part of operations and decision-making
- Encourage integration of Urban Waters goals in municipal planning documents and development ordinances
- Create partnerships and promote sustainable agricultural systems, including urban agriculture
- Leverage water investments to generate community benefits

### **Theme 4: Foster Active Collaboration and True Partnership**

- Leverage resources, share information, and work collaboratively to support joint projects and objectives.
- Facilitate regular and extensive stakeholder and community input and engagement
- Support upstream and downstream public-private partnerships and communication
- Integrate planning across the water cycle (e.g., promoting and supporting the implementation of collaborative watershed management frameworks, such as “One Water”)
- Sustain a foundation of success by emphasizing the benefits of collaboration
  - Networking
  - Sharing resources
  - Promoting leadership opportunities

### **Community Engagement**

The MRG/ABQ Urban Waters Partnership will utilize demographic data to engage with the community.

## Leadership

The Steering Committee is responsible for guiding and facilitating the Partnership. The Steering Committee is coordinated and supported by the Urban Waters Ambassador (the Ambassador), a position that is currently hosted by Ciudad Soil and Water Conservation District.

In order to stay connected to national Urban Waters leadership, the Ambassador maintains a relationship between the Partnership and the EPA program leads, as well as with the

Ambassadors of other cities in the Urban Waters Federal Partnership network. However, the work of the MRG/ABQ Partnership is predominantly driven by local leadership. The membership, operating guidelines, and role of the Steering Committee as well as the role of the Ambassador are described below:

### **Steering Committee Membership:**

In order for the membership of Steering Committee to accurately represent the balance of diverse stakeholders who participate in the Partnership, the ideal representation in the Steering Committee is as follows:

- 2-3 non-profit representatives
- 2-3 federal agency representatives
- 2-3 local/regional government representatives (city, county, or other regional municipal authority)
- 2-3 tribal government representatives
- 1 state government representative
- 1 academia/higher education representative

### **Steering Committee Operating Guidelines:**

- The Steering Committee will operate collegially – there will be no slate or election of officers
- New Steering Committee members agree to a minimum commitment of one year
- The Steering Committee will meet once a month on a predetermined schedule
- The Steering Committee will have 8-12 members, not including the Urban Waters Ambassador
- There are no term limits imposed by the Steering Committee
- Steering Committee members who are stepping down should give at least one month notice and should do what they can to help find someone from the Partnership to fill their seat
- Any member of the greater partnership can volunteer to join the Steering Committee, or may be invited to join by the current Steering Committee
- Steering Committee member seats are filled on a first-come, first-served basis. However, the Steering Committee will work to maintain a balanced representation of organizations
- Partners that are interested in joining the Steering Committee are encouraged to attend a Steering Committee meeting to observe and ask questions

### **Role of the Steering Committee:**

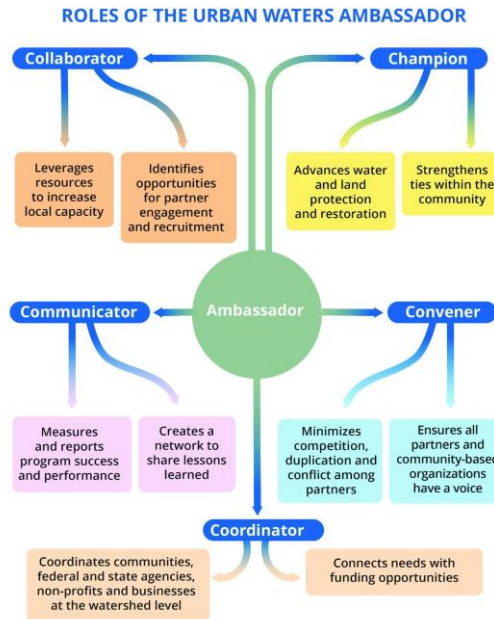
- Represents a balanced broad mix of stakeholders and types of organizations involved in the partnership
- Works together to develop, evolve, and support the vision and activities of the Partnership

- Attends monthly Steering Committee meetings to plan for general Partnership meetings and discusses progress toward objectives and MRG/ABQ Partnership goals on an annual basis
- Supports the Ambassador by providing direction and feedback on Partnership initiatives, and by completing occasional action items
- Attends and supports Partnership meetings, including logistical support
- Advocates for and represents the partnership in the community, encourages participation from partners, identifies and invites new partners
- Helps Ambassador with developing general Partnership meeting content and identifying presenters
- Actively recruits new members to serve on the Steering Committee
- Advocates for the Urban Waters Partnership at partner events and meetings

### **Role of the Ambassador:**

- Advocates Local Partnerships:
  - Build and maintain partnerships with Community-Based Nonprofits, community groups, State, Tribal, and local government agencies to establish a strong foundation for the MRG UWFP program.
  - Serve as a catalyst to facilitate the successful completion of on-the-ground projects in the Albuquerque urbanized area, focusing on the restoration and conservation of the Rio Grande and its watershed.
  - Solicit input from the community regarding concerns, needs, and project ideas that align with the goals of the MRG UWFP.
  - Integrate the UWFP process and projects into other local initiatives and projects to enhance capacity to withstand environmental stress in the Albuquerque Metropolitan Area.
  - Work with project partners to ensure adequate resources and effective collaboration for project implementation.
- Acts as a liaison with Federal/Agency Partners:
  - Connect federal tools and resources with the specific needs of the Albuquerque urbanized area to support the MRG UWFP program.
  - Serves as point of contact between the Partnership and the national Urban Waters network, attending monthly calls and providing updates on MRG UWFP activities.
  - Provide quarterly project reports to EPA Region 6 and Valle de Oro NWR staff.
- Assists the UW Steering Committee:
  - Strategize with Partnership Steering Committee to implement actions that improve the meaningful engagement with the community in the Middle Rio Grande UWFP, including, but not limited to, assembling surveys.
  - Coordinate and facilitate Partnership Steering Committee meetings, ensuring effective communication and collaboration among engaged stakeholders.

- Follow through on action items identified by the Steering Committee to ensure timely completion of tasks and objectives.
- Identify partners to present their projects at Partnership meetings (primarily quarterly meetings) and provide support in preparing presentations and materials.
- Conduct quarterly project partner meetings to provide updates, share information, and discuss potential new project opportunities.
- Follow through on action items (e.g., connecting folks through UWFP) identified by Urban Waters partners.
- Maintain grants cycle calendar.
- Documents and Disseminates UW information:
  - Communicate and collaborate with other Urban Waters Ambassadors to share experiences and knowledge.
  - Maintain Partnership files, including project documentation, meeting notes, and other key documents to track progress and ensure accountability.
  - Develop and improve materials and resources for the Partnership, including newsletters, project updates, and outreach materials. In particular, the regular email newsletter will include (or a combination):
    - i. Information about past and future Partnership meetings, including links as needed
    - ii. Partner project updates
    - iii. Announcements, photos, and other updates submitted by partners
    - iv. Requests for action, feedback or involvement of some kind from the partners
    - v. Relevant funding opportunities
    - vi. Local job announcements
    - vii. Trainings/webinars
    - viii. Items of interest from the national Urban Waters Federal Partnership newsletter
  - Manage general communications through the MRG/ABQ Urban Waters Partnership website and other forms of communication (regular and as-needed) to keep stakeholders informed about MRG/ABQ Urban Waters Partnership activities and project ideas.



## Newsletter

The Ambassador will maintain a regular email newsletter, with a new issue sent out every month. The function of the newsletter will be to keep the partners connected and informed between Partnership meetings. Newsletters can contain any combination of the following:

- Information about past and future Partnership meetings, including links to presentations and other materials presented at whole Partnership meetings
- Partner project updates (submitted by partners using a form maintained by the Ambassador)
- Announcements, photos, and other updates submitted by partners
- Requests for action, feedback or involvement of some kind from the partners (i.e., request for project updates)
- Relevant funding opportunities
- Local job announcements
- Trainings/webinars
- Items of interest from the national Urban Waters Federal Partnership newsletter

## 2025-2026 Objectives

- 1.) Sustainability of the Urban Waters Partnership.
  - a. May 2023 and beyond - Ambassador position is an employee with Ciudad Soil and Water Conservation District. Continue to identify and source funding for Urban Waters projects from UW partner organizations and grants.
  - b. In the federal FY 2026 the UW Partnership will apply for NM Office of Outdoor Recreation Trails+ Grant; Greater Rio Grande Watershed Alliance; NM Energy, Minerals and Natural Resources Division Urban Forestry Assistance Program; Water Quality and Conservation Grant Program through the NM Soil and Water Conservation Commission; Bernalillo County Natural Resource Services and Open Space Program; City of Albuquerque Open Space Division funding for the Tijeras Bio-Zone and Candelaria Nature Preserve.
  - c. In addition, the Ambassador will work to collaborate on grants with UW partners such as the Clean Water SRF and the New Mexico Water Resources Research Institute.
  - d. Working with the state and partners to invest in recurring funding for the Urban Waters Partnership's projects. For example, reaching out to NM legislators for Capital Outlay funding, discretionary funds, and possibly legislation to support UWP long-term.
- 2.) Increase participation in the Partnership/Steering Committee and actively invite stakeholders who are not yet involved to participate. Care for and maintain relationships so partners can weave in and out as needed. Encourage shadowing for the Steering Committee before joining.
  - a. Dedicate more regular, unstructured networking events to build relationships between partners to help build relationships and allow for even more opportunities to engage with the MRG/ABQ Urban Waters Partnership.
- 3.) Continue to develop and improve the vision, goals, and themes of the Partnership.
- 4.) Continue to develop and improve the format of Partnership meetings and explore different ways of utilizing the break-out sessions. Coordinate Partnership meetings once a quarter.
- 5.) Explore methods for tracking and sharing collective outcomes to help blaze the trail for future project and education successes and to monitor progress towards the Partnership's goals. Explore ways to measure and document project successes in the context of the themes to help guide/steer.
  - a. Present collective outcomes annually to City of Albuquerque Councilors.

- b. Collaborate with partners (Center for Community Geography at UNM) to create a spreadsheet, Story Map, and/or GIS project map of MRG UWP projects.
  - c. Develop and administer a social survey to collect data from partners to improve the benefit of the Partnership to stakeholders and the community. Share the survey instrument with Ambassadors at other Partnership locations to highlight the MRG/ABQ Urban Waters Partnership's efforts to improve meaningful community engagement.
- 6.) Implement and document the Artist in Residence pilot program with EPA and USFWS.