

# THE SANGRE DE CRISTO MOUNTAIN INITIATIVE

## *An Audacious Commonsense Proposal*

BY CHARLES CURTIN

In this and the previous issue of *Green Fire Times*, I have reviewed the many challenges facing communities that burned in recent wildfires. There are many complaints about what is wrong, and I've contributed some myself—but few proposals for proactive, viable solutions. We've got one, and we ask communities, our leaders, policymakers, funders and foundations to take a break from business as usual, give us a listen, and invest in a new approach. Because with national attention and vast amounts of resources pouring into the region, we'll likely never have a better chance to fundamentally improve our forest and watershed stewardship and the health of our mountain landscapes and communities.

### MOVING BEYOND THE POLITICS OF DIVISION

In New Mexico and across the West, we see the consequences of competition, division, fragmentary policies and short-sighted planning in the too-thick stands of trees choking our forests, the diminished habitat for wildlife, and the robbing of acequias, farms and ranches of the water needed to sustain life and livelihoods. At the same time, a shortage of good-paying jobs is leading to the growth of the region's most significant export: our children.

These collective failures are also evidenced in the fire scars radiating across our landscapes and the floods that roar down our valleys, the decimated water supplies to cities such as Las Vegas, the lost homes and lifeways, staggering firefighting costs and incalculable human suffering. In short, the challenges we face are not just economic or ecological—but about social justice. Do we turn our back on lifeways that have come to define New Mexico, or do we lean into the hard work of reconceiving how we treat the land and the people who rely on it? We need more than short-term band-aid solutions—but also long-term strategic approaches that address causes and not just the symptoms.

As a scientist and conservationist who for decades has worked at the confluence of ecology and culture, I've been struck by how the health of landscapes and watersheds often reflects the health of the social systems within which they are embedded. This observation that people create their environmental reality was driven home to me during collaborative work with the rancher-led Malpai Borderlands Group in southern Arizona and New Mexico beginning in the 1990s.



*The future that awaits? If we do not thin and clear burned timber, within a few years our forests will become dangerous and impassible, limiting people's access to their forests and way of life. © Charles Curtin*

This rugged and hard-bitten group had long suspected and fought against outsiders. Yet, through a chance encounter with Quaker activist Jim Corbett, who was leading Central American refugees through the borderlands as part of the Sanctuary Movement, the ranchers realized they were fighting a war of attrition. If they continued an adversarial stance, their lifestyle and livelihoods would soon be gone.

So, they did something radical—they invited the groups they most feared, environmentalists and government agencies, into their homes and communities. Soon they discovered they had a lot in common regarding a passion for nature. Through the concept of the “radical center,” they embraced an approach of inclusion rather than exclusion to transform not just their lives and landscape—but that of countless other communities across the globe that followed their example.

In the decades since, I've seen the same pattern many times in projects with pastoralists in East Africa, fishermen of the western Atlantic, Arab and Israeli conservationists in the Middle East, Montana ranchers, tribal bison recovery programs, New Mexican Hispanic communities, New England farmers and many others. They all succeed or fail for the same short list of reasons. How people conceptualize challenges determines the outcome (see my author website [CHARLESCURTIN.COM](http://CHARLESCURTIN.COM) and 2015 book *Science of Open Spaces* for more details).

Archimedes purportedly said, “Give me a lever long enough and a fulcrum on which to place it, and I shall move the world.” In our case, the fulcrum is shifting people's emotional and mental perceptions. In my career, I've moved from highly technical replicated landscape studies to focus on community building, and now emphasize shifting cognitive processes as the lever that transforms. In this context, northern New Mexico is a tough nut to crack because there has been generational trauma and longstanding fear of outsiders. Suspicion is the fortress wall that has preserved cultural integrity in the face of the onslaught of mass culture, media and commercialization but has also inadvertently created competition and dysfunction within communities.

As with the borderland's ranchers, this defensive stance has outlived its usefulness because it leads to the inevitable loss of land, lifeways and livelihoods. As forestry business owner David Old points out, like “crabs trying to escape a bucket,” too often, people pull down others rather than seeking to raise everyone's opportunities.

*We'll likely never have a better chance to fundamentally improve the health of our mountain landscapes and communities.*

Across the board, from individuals to local politicians and on to the highest levels of government, we encounter the same pathologies where people's first response is to ignore or attack anything new or novel—even when they stand to gain in the process. Our burnt and overly thick stands of trees and drying watershed are a direct outcome of this dysfunction. So, community and landscape revitalization require reconceiving how people interact before one can reconceive the solution itself.

so open it was said you could ride a horse through them (sometimes at a gallop!). A grassy understory consisting of a diversity of nutritious native grasses was the foundation of a robust ecosystem. By contrast, today's forests' dark and shaded understories are a virtual desert. In sum, our forest ecosystems are out of whack with historical patterns, as they've been gradually transformed from open savanna-like habitats to closed forests with dense canopies and no understory. Ecologists call these trends shifting baselines, when slow incremental changes lead to historical anomalies becoming the new normal people experience in their lives.

And that's the issue! Few have seen a healthy forest, so they have no idea what they are missing! Like the proverbial frog in boiling water, the situation declines so slowly people don't realize they're in hot water living amongst a sick and dying ecosystem. The recent fires and floods and all the associated

*Within 24 to 48 months, \$100 million in commercial value from deteriorating sawlogs will be lost.*

traumas are the natural response of a system seeking to return to the processes around which it evolved. Our goal is to use this narrow window of opportunity to restore our forests and watersheds to a healthy state where catastrophic fire and floods are not the inevitable outcome of disequilibrium.

#### WHAT IS THE SANGRE

#### DE CRISTO MOUNTAIN INITIATIVE?

We are a consortium of ranchers, loggers, foresters, conservationists, ecologists and finance and transportation experts who together have decades of experience developing integrated solutions to complex and multi-faceted challenges (see [www.SDCMI.org](http://www.SDCMI.org)). We are seeking to revitalize the forestry industry of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains as a means of restoring landscapes and communities in the Hispano-Indigenous uplands of north-central New Mexico. Our current thinking is built upon more than a decade of talking with and learning from local people.

What began with a focus on renewable biomass energy to thin our forests while producing valuable ecosystem-renewing products such as biochar—has transformed into a more integrated strategy where we realize the carbon-negative energy from wood products is only part of the solution. Instead, we must couple it with re-envisioning the whole process from the tree to the markets. This is done through a carbon supply chain strategy that seeks to create



*The Mora Valley with dense forest growth ablaze, 2022*  
© Charles Curtin

#### WHAT'S THE POINT?

Communities, primarily in Mora and San Miguel counties, have been decimated by recent fires. Within 24 to 48 months, \$100 million in commercial value from deteriorating sawlogs will be lost (in addition to small-diameter biomass in the years that follow). This potential income matters because there are insufficient resources to restore our forests post-fire. So, this income would pay for clearing dead timber and the thinning of live trees, which has immense importance in allowing local people access to their forests for firewood cutting, grazing, hunting and many other traditional uses that are crucial parts of their culture and livelihoods.

But what of the live trees? Why harvest those? Aren't trees good for the environment? You may ask...

Trees are, of course, crucial for the environment, yet current forest stand densities in New Mexico are often 100 times historic levels. This is not healthy! Not only do these thickets lead to wildfires and insect outbreaks,

but the typical tree also uses about 100 gallons of water daily. Multiply that by millions of trees, and you can see why the acequias, farms and settlements downslope from the mountains face water shortages (even without a warming and drying climate).

Before European settlement, due to aboriginal burning, many of New Mexico's forests were

*Suspicion has preserved cultural integrity but has also created competition and dysfunction within communities.*



*Santa Gertrudis de la Mora parish leads a procession on the main road of the village of Mora. This 1895 image depicts scant forested vegetation on the hillsides. Courtesy, New Mexico Historical Society*

efficiencies through principles borrowed from permaculture and regenerative design to ensure that, like any healthy ecosystem, as much of the materials and benefits as possible flow back to the local landscapes and communities.

*As much of the materials and benefits as possible flow back to the local landscapes and communities.*

**This requires investing in an integrated approach that:**

- Increases the capacity of local participants in the forestry industry both individually and through strategically coordinated sharing of resources
- Focuses on existing constraints to a viable forest industry and forest recovery process such as mill capacity
- Adds in biomass energy and other regenerative sectors to make the existing industry more carbon negative, efficient and profitable
- Attracts outside businesses such as Woodsyn from Arizona, which uses small-diameter trees to create carbon-sequestering building materials

*The health of landscapes and watersheds often reflects the health of the social systems within which they are embedded.*

However, this expanded capacity cannot happen fast enough to meet the need to rapidly remove over 250 million board feet of burned timber from private lands in a few years. So, in the near term, this requires reaching out-of-state markets, and the most efficient and carbon-smart way to do this is through reviving our railroads.

Yes, this is a big lift—but all our team have successfully completed similarly scaled projects. Again, this is primarily not a technological or engineering challenge—but a cognitive one. People must perceive a different and more viable future to generate more equitable and durable outcomes.

Toward that end, in addition to reaching out to people individually and in small gatherings, we've assembled a database of hundreds of key stakeholders from across the region and convened listening sessions where we engage people in the project formulation process. However, this is not the usual pattern where people talk at each other, say nice visionary

things—and then leave. It's an interactive process our partner OnTrackNorthAmerica has refined for decades. They have developed a system of constructive dialogue between diverse people to reach concrete solutions to complex and messy challenges. This framework for constructive dialogue is fundamentally different because it allows people to hear each other and collectively move toward a jointly arrived-at solution that transforms people's thinking and actions.

So why call our approach both audacious and common sense? Well, we are asking a political system built around individual gain to instead focus on the collective benefit. And we're asking for it to be done at an unprecedented scale, scope and speed (over a million acres in a few years). And yet it makes sense. There is no alternative to renewing our lands and livelihoods, and we'll likely never have a better shot at it.

*We are seeking to revitalize the forestry industry of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains as a means of restoring landscapes and communities.*

How can you get involved in the process? First, if you want to be engaged in our approach, reach out to us through the contact information on our website ([WWW.SDCMI.ORG](http://WWW.SDCMI.ORG)). If you are a stakeholder or have a connection with our communities and mountains, we want your input!

Second, we are developing a conceptual plan to allow us to move forward rapidly with the next steps. State and federal governments can't move fast enough to address our challenges. So, a public-private partnership is essential in crafting realistic long-term solutions. We need your engagement in the process and hope you'll reach out to political powers, from the governor on down, letting them know we need a new open and inclusive approach that works with ecological principles—not against them.

Finally, don't take our word for it—investigate for yourself! Come with an open mind, creatively seek new solutions, and join us to reconceive the future of our rural communities and forested uplands. ■