



## NEWS RELEASE

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### **Vehicle Closure in effect July 1<sup>st</sup> for Bosque Access in Valencia and Northern Socorro Counties and Peña Blanca Area**

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Albuquerque, NM - The Middle Rio Grande Conservancy District (District) is issuing notice to area residents that the agency will be implementing vehicle closures needed to prevent additional bosque fires and resource damage in the MRGCD's Belen Division.

In the midst of a very dry year in the Middle Rio Grande valley, on July 1<sup>st</sup>, the Middle Rio Grande Conservancy District will suspend its bosque vehicle access permit program and close the levee roads and "bosque" river forest to all non-official motorized vehicle access until further notice. High fire danger, several recent bosque fires, the large increase in motorized uses of the bosque in Valencia County and the July Fourth holiday were all important factors in this decision. The bosque will remain open for non-motorized recreation and access, subject to the existing regulations of the Conservancy District and local land management partners.

"With the Covid-19 restrictions and closures, and so many residents at home now, we've seen an unprecedented increase in visitation to the bosque throughout the MRGCD over the past three months, said Mike Hamman, the Conservancy District's Chief Engineer and CEO. "People are enjoying and taking their children to experience our precious Rio Grande bosque, in some cases for the first time. Most are walking trails and levee roads, riding bicycles or horses, fishing and enjoying the river on a hot summer day with their families. However, we've also witnessed and received almost daily reports from residents concerned about the large numbers of vehicles off roading in the bosque, river and on irrigation facilities in violation of the Conservancy District's policies, as well as large gatherings, bonfires and trash left behind. We're very concerned about the public safety risks these activities pose. We're experiencing a lot of largely unauthorized

OHV and vehicle access that is accelerating erosion and damage to our irrigation facilities, flood control levees, water quality and bosque habitat. Some of these areas may take decades to recover or require additional financial and staff resources to repair them,” Hamman said.

Local governments and Conservancy District staff are having to spend already stretched resources repairing vandalized traffic gates and responding to calls from people who were locked in the bosque or got their vehicles stuck in the river, often at night. Local and state fire agencies have already responded to several bosque fires in Valencia County within the last month. Vehicles could ignite fine fuels like grasses, especially in a dry year like this, quickly becoming a large wildfire.

Chief Brian Culp, Valencia County Fire Department, said “The Valencia County Fire Department is extremely concerned with the dry and drought conditions that we currently have within the County. Conditions within the bosque have a high fire potential as was seen this week with the bosque fire that occurred on the 22nd of June. Reducing the potential of having fires within the bosque should be a top priority.”

The Conservancy District reminds visitors that the Rio Grande bosque is critically important habitat for hundreds of species of birds and other wildlife that breed and raise their young here during the summer. Native cottonwoods and many other plants aren’t adapted to and won’t survive most wildfires. Additional fire restrictions are currently in place, however, fireworks, fires outside of grills provided in developed parks and smoking outside of vehicles are never allowed in Conservancy District-owned bosque. “We ask everyone to be vigilant and help us keep the bosque and the Rio Grande clean and green,” Mike Hamman said.

The vehicle closure applies only to lands and facilities owned by the Conservancy District in the Belen Division, from the southern boundary of Isleta Pueblo to the San Acacia Diversion Dam south of Highway 60. This closure does not apply to Pueblo, private or other State or Federal lands within this river reach.

The Conservancy District is working closely with local fire departments and law enforcement and the New Mexico Forestry Division to monitor the conditions and use of the bosque. To report a bosque fire or emergency please call 911.

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**About the MRGCD:** The Middle Rio Grande Conservancy District has been promoting sustainable agriculture for the past 85 years. The District delivers water to about 60,000 acres of cropland in the Middle Rio Grande Valley. That water is reused time and time again to irrigate crops, sustains the cottonwood bosque along the Rio Grande, help create and maintain habitat for the endangered Rio Grande silvery minnow and recharges the aquifer. The District owns 30,000 acres of bosque in the valley, the largest continuous cottonwood forest in the world, and a stretch of land that provides unprecedented recreational opportunities and an irreplaceable swath of greenbelt in New Mexico’s largest metropolitan area. The District was formed in 1925 to alleviate flooding and to reclaim farmland in the valley. Its boundaries stretch 150 miles from Cochiti Dam to the north to the boundary of the Bosque Del Apache National Wildlife Refuge on the south, running through Sandoval, Bernalillo, Valencia and Socorro Counties. It operates more than 1,200 miles of canals, laterals and drains, which are used to convey water to and from cropland. The District is funded by water service charges and property assessments on the benefited lands within its boundaries.