



**SCHOOL  
OF LAW**

**NATURAL RESOURCES &  
ENVIRONMENTAL LAW PROGRAM**



## Fall 2025 Newsletter



"PROTECT.PRESERVE. PROSPER."

### Recent Updates & Insights from UNM's NREL Program

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### **PROF. VILLA RETURNS TO UNM LAW AFTER SERVICE IN BIDEN ADMINISTRATION**

For the Fall 2025 semester, Prof. Cliff Villa returned to the classroom at UNM Law after serving in the Biden administration in Washington, D.C., where he led the EPA Office of Land and Emergency Management as Deputy Assistant Administrator. In that capacity, Cliff provided political leadership in areas including Superfund cleanup, Brownfields redevelopment, emergency response, and waste management, emphasizing opportunities to promote environmental justice and climate action. Cliff led efforts to establish new federal policies and regulations addressing concerns including lead exposure, PFAS, chemical facilities, and cumulative impacts. With additional funding from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, Cliff also helped allocate some \$2.5 billion per year, investing in underserved communities, accelerating cleanup of contaminated lands, and creating new programs to expand recycling and to reduce plastic pollution and food waste across the country.

### **UNM LAW WELCOMES FNREL NATURAL RESOURCES LAW TEACHERS INSTITUTE IN 2026**

The UNM Natural Resources and Environmental Law (NREL) Program is thrilled to welcome the Foundation for Natural Resources and Energy Law's Natural Resources Law Teachers Institute (NRLTI) **next year, May 27–29, 2026.**

The bi-annual conference brings together natural resources and



environmental law teachers from across the country to discuss cutting-edge issues in the field. The conference will be hosted at **the historic Hotel Andaluz in Albuquerque, New Mexico.**

**“We are thrilled that our proposal was accepted,”** said Prof. Warigia Bowman, who pitched the proposal for the UNM team at FNREL’s Annual Institute in July 2025. **“We are looking forward to showcasing many of the natural resource challenges — and solutions — that are being addressed in New Mexico, including issues relating to water law, energy law, and the intersection of tribal and natural resources law.”**

An FNREL planning committee is working on putting together the program, which will include one or more field visits in New Mexico. **“In addition to being full of cutting-edge natural resources issues, New Mexico is truly the ‘Land of Enchantment,’ which we look forward to sharing with many of our colleagues here next year,”** added NREL Program Director Cliff Villa.



## **Life after Fire:**

### **(Re)Imagining Post Fire Recovery for Headwater Dependent Communities**

#### **UNM NATURAL RESOURCES CENTER, UTTON CENTER HOST LIFE AFTER FIRE SYMPOSIUM**

On October 24, the UNM Natural Resources Journal, Natural Resources and Environmental Law Program, Utton Transboundary Resources Center, and the Intermountain West Transformation Network hosted the “Life After Fire: (Re)Imagining Post Fire Recovery for Headwater Dependent Communities” symposium at the UNM Continuing Education Building in Albuquerque, NM. This event explored legal, ecological, and community dimensions of post wildfire recovery, anchored in the aftermath of the 2022 Hermits Peak/Calf Canyon Fire. The interdisciplinary event highlighted emerging research, policy responses, and adaptation strategies shaping the future of natural resource management in a warming world. Speakers included Robin Kundis Craig, Robert A. Schroeder Distinguished Professor of Law, University of Kansas School of Law, Melinda Morgan, Regents’ Professor in Geography



and Environmental Studies, University of New Mexico, New Mexico State Forester Laura McCarthy, and Prof. Cliff Villa, among others. Proceedings from the symposium will be published next summer in Volume 66 of the Natural Resources Journal.



### **JUST TRANSITION GRAND CHALLENGE HOSTS RESILIENT ENERGY ECONOMIES ANNUAL MEETING**

In June 2025, UNM's Just Transition Grand Challenge faculty and students co-hosted the annual meeting of the Resilient Energy Economies (REE) Initiative. The event brought together approximately 100 scholars and policymakers working to support the transition of fossil-fuel dependent communities to a low-carbon economy. Prof. Gabe Pacyniak provided opening remarks and also participated in a keynote fireside chat with Rep. Melanie Stansbury. Just Transition faculty and students also presented research posters at the event. The team put on a public-facing pre-event on June 16, with REE researchers presenting an overview of best practices across the country related to replacing lost revenue, workforce development, and developing alternative economic opportunities.



### **UNM LAW CLASS OF 2025 TIES RECORD FOR NREL**



## CERTIFICATES

In May 2025, UNM maintained its record interest among students in Natural Resources and Environmental Law by graduating sixteen students with the NREL Certificate. To gain the certificate, students need to take 21 credit hours in qualifying courses, including writing and experiential learning courses



*Clinical Law Student Justin Niska and Max Whittaker prepare for trial.*

### CLINIC STUDENTS HELP LAND GRANT QUIET TITLE TO COMMON LANDS IN FOUR-DAY TRIAL

Last February in Taos, New Mexico, students in the UNM NREL Clinic went to court and successfully helped a land grant client quiet title to a portion of their common lands. In New Mexico, land grant-merced lands are political subdivisions that manage common lands originally granted to communities by the Spanish or Mexican sovereign. In this matter, UNM clinic students represented a land grant client for over two years in a dispute over a portion of common land. After a four-day trial in state court that involved three expert witnesses and multiple lay witnesses, the students largely prevailed on behalf of their land grant client. Over a dozen students worked on the case over the course of six semesters, supervised by Professors Gabe Pacyniak and Nadine Padilla. “This was a great opportunity for our students to get real-world litigation experience and support a community with limited resources,” noted Prof. Pacyniak.

**Rachel Grabenstein** came to UNM Law with a strong background and interest in public lands. Before law school, she earned a B.S. in wildlife biology from the University of Montana and worked for many years as a seasonal ranger for the National Park Service (NPS). After graduating from UNM Law in 2022, Rachel returned to the federal government and started working for the U.S. Department of the Interior, Office of the Solicitor, Southwest Regional



Office. As part of her practice at the Department of Interior, Rachel advises the NPS and Fish Wildlife Service on a variety of natural resource and public land law issues. Her practice includes a focus on the NPS Organic Act, the Endangered Species Act, and the Wilderness Act. Rachel's prior NPS experience equipped her with tools to understand her clients and to develop practical, client-oriented solutions. Rachel's love for public lands extends to her personal life as well. She likes to spend her free time backpacking and rafting and deals with the same permit challenges as everyone else!



**NREL ALUM SPOTLIGHT:  
RACHEL GRABENSTEIN**

## **FACULTY PUBLICATIONS, PRESENTATIONS, AND SERVICES**



**Emeritus Professor Reed  
Benson**

***Emeritus Prof. Reed Benson***, we fear, is having way too much fun in his (well-deserved) retirement! In 2025, Reed was named an Honorary Trustee by the Foundation for Natural Resources and Energy Law, a lifetime honor recognizing Reed's years of service to the Foundation. Reed was a member of the Foundation's board of directors from 2019-21, served eight years on the Scholarships Committee, and played a role in expanding the Foundation's water law programs. He served on the Trustees Council for twenty years, serving as UNM's official representative for most of that time. Reed received the Foundation's Clyde O. Martz Award for teaching excellence in 2021. Along with co-authors Karrigan Bork, Vanessa Casado Perez, and Burke Griggs, Reed is working on a new edition of the Water Resource Management casebook that will be ready for Fall 2026.

**Prof. Warigia Bowman** published an article entitled *Surviving the Megadrought* in the Ohio State Law Journal in April 2025. In July, Bowman represented UNM Law at the FNREL Annual Institute in Whistler, B.C., where she successfully proposed for the FNREL Natural Resources Law Teachers Institute to be hosted next year in Albuquerque. In September, Bowman presented on aquifer depletion in Southern New Mexico at the 12th Judicial Bar and Bench Conference. She was also appointed as a Member of the Albuquerque Bernalillo County Water Protection Board. In October, Warigia



participated in the ABA SEER fall meeting in Washington, D.C., where she spoke on a panel, "Bridge Over Troubled Waters – Water Rights, Climate Change, and Related Challenges and Opportunities." She also spoke on aquifer depletion on a panel on Water Security at the Great Lakes Water Conference hosted by the University of Toledo College of Law. NREL student Taylor Black and Prof. Bowman authored an article for the New Mexico Bar Bulletin entitled "Rio Grande Reckoning: Rethinking Groundwater Rights and Resources During Drought." Perhaps most excitingly, Prof. Bowman also ran for and won a contested seat on the Albuquerque Public School Board. Congratulations, Warigia! (We still owe you a champagne toast!)

*Article Link: Surviving the Megadrought*

**Prof. Nadine Padilla** published an article, *Abandoned Mines, Abandoned Treaties: The Federal Government's Failure to Remediate Abandoned Uranium Mines on the Navajo Nation*, earlier this year with the Colorado Law Review. The article provides an update on the remediation status of abandoned uranium mines on the Navajo reservation and discusses the treaty and trust obligations owed to the tribe to remediate abandoned mines. Nadine participated in the national EJ and Indigenous Organizational Legal Defense Coordination Retreat at NYU to discuss tribal experiences and needs given the changing federal landscape. Nadine also hosted 20 Native American high school students at the law school to discuss the incorporation of traditional and cultural values in tribal law as part of a pathways to law program for students interested in legal careers. In her continuing role as an Appellate Court Justice for the Pueblo of Isleta, she served on a panel at the State Bar of New Mexico's Annual Meeting with New Mexico Supreme Court Justices Julie Vargas and Shannon Bacon and Chief Justice Roshanna Toya from the Pueblo of Isleta Appellate Court to discuss state and tribal relations and how state and tribal courts can work more effectively together.

*Nadine Padilla: Colorado Law Review Article*

**Prof. Elizabeth Elia** was promoted to full professor with tenure this summer. Her most recent article, what if Inclusionary Zoning Laws are Legislative Exactions? will be published later this academic year by the Michigan State University Law Review. Elizabeth spoke about legislative exactions on an ABA Real Property CLE panel in April, and she was a reviewer for a Housing and Exactions working group assembled by the Pacific Legal Foundation in May. Additionally, Elizabeth has been named Chair of FNREL's *Law Student Programs Committee*. The Committee grants scholarships to students from non-member schools to attend the Foundation's outstanding programming on a broad variety of topics related to natural resources and energy law. Finally, in her work as Co-Chair of the ABA's Real Property, Trusts & Estates Continuing Education section, Elizabeth has been working with colleagues to plan upcoming topics for the free monthly webinar, *"The Professors' Corner."* Notable upcoming topics include Tribal Property Governance and Co-management on January 13, 2026, and a discussion of City & County of San Francisco v. EPA on February 10, 2026.

*Web Link: Law Student Programs Committee*

*Web Link: The Professors' Corner*

**Prof. Gabe Pacyniak** is on academic sabbatical this academic year researching the implementation of the European Union's Just Transition Mechanism, based at the Centre for Environmental Law Studies of Tarragona in Spain. Gabe and his Just



Transition Grand Challenge colleagues Prof. Shannon Sanchez-Youngman, Melanie Sonntag, and Addison Fulton also recently published **Inclusive Workforce Development for an Equitable Low-Carbon Transition** in the UNM Natural Resources Journal. Gabe co-presented on the clinic's work on environmental justice issues at NYU Environmental Justice Initiative's online workshop, "State Efforts to Advance Consideration of Cumulative Impacts," and at to the UNM METALS Superfund Research Program. He also participated this summer in the Environmental Law Collaborative workshop in New York.

*Web Link: **Inclusive Workforce Development for an Equitable Low-Carbon Transition***

On October 16, **Prof. Jennifer Laws** presented a live webinar CLE for FNREL, "Using AI Legal Research Tools in Natural Resources, Energy, and Environmental Practice." On November 10, she participated in a hybrid CLE at UNM Law, "AI in Legal Practice." As faculty advisor for the student **Environmental Law Society**, she helped support the annual ELS Fall Mixer on October 28. Jen also shamelessly recruited UNM law faculty to participate in a ping-pong tournament hosted by ELS on November 13. In Spring 2026, Jen will be teaching Applied Legal Research with an NREL focus and she will no doubt be dragging law faculty into further escapades

After returning from Washington, D.C., **Prof. Cliff Villa** completed work on the 4 edition of his co-authored textbook, **Environmental Justice: Law, Policy & Regulation**, currently anticipated for release in January. Cliff contributed an essay, **Earth Day: 2025.**, for the summer edition of the ABA's Natural Resources & Environment magazine. Since January, Cliff has shared lessons learned from his political service in a number of venues, including presentations at Yale, Columbia, Georgetown, Duke, Lewis & Clark, Southern Methodist University, the University of Washington, the Harris County Attorney's Office in Texas, and the 34 Annual Environmental Law Conference at Yosemite in California. In October, Cliff spoke at the Wildfire symposium hosted by the Natural Resources Journal, giving a presentation entitled, Trial by Fire: Disaster Justice and Lessons Learned. In December, Cliff will be featured as a keynote speaker at a program hosted by the Greater Birmingham Alliance to Stop Pollution (GASP), in Birmingham, Alabama.

*Web Link: **Environmental Justice: Law, Policy & Regulation***

*Web Link: **Earth Day: 2025***

In May, the **UNM Utton Transboundary Resources Center** produced a **video** about shortage sharing along the Rio Chama. Utton Center attorney Rin Tara and Utton Center Writer-in-Residence John Fleck have released six episodes of the Center's **Water Matters!** podcast, including episodes on Acequias in New Mexico and Adaptive Agriculture. In June, Rin, John, and Eric Kuhn published an article in the New Mexico Law Review, **Unfinished Business: Twenty-First Century Questions Posed by Ambiguities in the Upper Colorado River Basin Compact and the Law of the River**. Rin has also been working this fall with two UNM law students in preparation for attending the **CITES 20 Conference of the Parties** in Uzbekistan Nov. 24-Dec.5.

*Video Link*

*Podcast Link:  
**Water Matters!***

*Unfinished  
Business: New  
Mexico Law Review*

*CITES 20th  
Conference  
of the  
Parties*

In April, Utton Center attorney **Stephanie Russo Baca** presented the results of



the Lower Rio Chama Case Study Report at the American Water Resource Association spring conference in Anchorage, Alaska. In November, Stephanie participated in the American Agricultural Law Association Educational Symposium in Scottsdale, Arizona. Stephanie continues her service on the Board of Directors for the **Middle Rio Grande Conservancy District** and will be teaching Agricultural Law in the Spring 2026 semester

### *Middle Rio Grande Conservancy District*

#### **UTTON CENTER UPDATES NATIVE AMERICAN WATER RIGHTS DIGITAL REPOSITORY**

The Utton Center updated the **Native American Water Rights Digital Repository** (NAWRS) and **mapping tool**. The NAWRS E-Repository is a collection of documents relating to the settlement of Native American water rights in the United States. The updated mapping tool complements the NAWRS E-Repository making it easier to visualize and find water rights settlements.

#### **About the UNM Natural Resources and Environmental Law Program**

New Mexico is a place with a stunning variety of scenic beauty and natural and cultural resources, which makes it an ideal backdrop for the study of natural resources and environmental law and policy on a national scale. UNM Law's **Natural Resources and Environmental Law (NREL) program** offers students a robust variety of experiences, including a full range of **courses** in the field, the NREL certificate program, the NREL clinic, the Natural Resources Journal (the oldest U.S. law review in the field), the **Utton Transboundary Resource Center** (a research center dedicated to natural resources and environmental issues), an externship program, and the **Environmental Law Society**. Students can also earn a dual degree in law and water resources.

*Web Link: NAWRS*

*Web Link: Mapping Tool*

*Web Link: NREL Program*

*Web Link: Courses*

*Web Link: Utton Resource Center*

*Web Link: Environmental Law Society*

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