

El Grito de Las Mercedes

Newsletter of the New Mexico Land Grant-Merced Movement

Los Vigiles Land Grant serves community through fire recovery efforts

When you speak with Joseph Padilla, it's no surprise that he is an educator. The secretary of the Los Vigiles Land Grant, Sr. Padilla retired from teaching in the West Las Vegas Schools, but still speaks with the enthusiasm of a teacher when he talks about the history of Los Vigiles, the needs of the community, and what the future holds for one of New Mexico's newest political subdivisions. Though the community won formal control of their common lands via a 1952 deed from the Las Vegas Land Grant, baptismal records for the area mention Los Vigiles by 1867. About a decade ago, when he was president of *La Cierrita de Los Vigiles*, Padilla was working with the New Mexico State Forestry Division to implement a thinning project on the *muerto de Sebastián*. When the Forestry Division realized the Los Vigiles was not a unit of government, but a private association, the project funding was withdrawn as it would violate the anti-donation clause. Though the community continued a smaller thinning project, it was not enough to prevent the devastation wrought by the Hermit's Peak / Calf Canyon Fire, which burned thousands of acres of Los Vigiles common land in 2022.

The Los Vigiles Land Grant Board, including President Eddie Quintana, Vice President Ruben Lucero, Treasurer Jacob Romero, forester Vidal Quintana and secretary Joseph Padilla, pivoted and looked to how they could make the best of the grave situation. They focused on removing the burnt trees off of their mountain to allow for reseeded and planting, clearing the hazard and giving it the mountain the space it needed to heal. After more than a decade of pursuing political subdivision status, which was championed by former Rep. Tomás Salazar and Rep. Miguel García, Los Vigiles was formally recognized as a political subdivision of the state in June of 2023. This cleared the way for the Forestry Division to develop a prescription for the mountain's recovery and Los Vigiles to use monies from the Land Grant Merced Assistance Fund Distribution to pull burnt trees off of the mountain, process them, and distribute the wood to the members of the grant.



*Board members and heirs from the Los Vigiles
Land Grant*

... Los Vigiles continued

Eddie, Vidal and Ruben all operate heavy equipment and brought in a dozer and track hoe to clear roads to make this project possible, donating countless hours to the project, which focuses on seventy-five burnt acres. So far more than 75 cords of firewood have been distributed and the entire project may net more than 300 cords.

Through their diligent work, during the 2024 legislative session, Eddie and Joseph secured more than \$1 million in capital outlay monies to purchase heavy equipment to rebuild roads and continue harvesting burnt wood from the common lands. Los Vigiles also plans to irrigate leased farmland to plant alfalfa and clear another area and plant drought resistant grasses, creating wildlife habitat and generating revenue through the sale of bales. They plan to reclaim another thirty plus acres for pasture and mill some logs into rough lumber. The Board has also been in conversations with San Miguel County to obtain an old escuelita that they plan to convert into an administrative center and meeting hall.



Important Reminders

- The next Land Grant Council meeting will be held on **May 17 at 10:00 am** in **Las Vegas** at Highlands University. Visit lgc.unm.edu for location information and how to participate virtually or in person.
- Interim budget requests for Fiscal Year 2025 (July 1, 2024 through June 30, 2025) are due June 1st. The Council will send out more information on these requests at a later date.