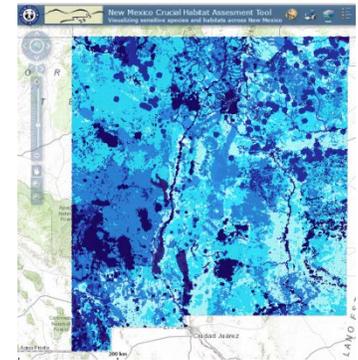




## Improving Conservation Using High-Tech Maps

New Mexican's now have a powerful new mapping tool that locates important wildlife habitat throughout New Mexico. Recent advances in science and technology allow map users to view key areas for animals and plants through the online map at <http://nmchat.org/>.

The easy to use New Mexico Crucial Habitat Assessment Tool, commonly referred to as NM CHAT, shows a detailed view of important wildlife habitat and corridors throughout the state. When used during the pre-planning stage of a development or conservation project, the web-based map can inform decisions that help protect vital wildlife areas and reduce conflicts and delays.



“The interactive map overlays allow users to display wetlands, wildlife corridors, crucial habitat and other information at the level of one-square mile hexagons,” said Department of Game and Fish Chief of Ecosystem and Environmental Planning Matt Wunder. “Land managers can use this information to avoid conflicts and make better choices for wildlife when planning projects such as transmission lines or conservation efforts.”

The New Mexico Department of Game and Fish collaborated with Natural Heritage New Mexico, a division of the Museum of Southwestern Biology at the University of New Mexico, to create NM CHAT using funds provided by the Western Governors’ Association. In the online map, data such as species distributions, movement corridors, habitat types, and large natural areas are combined to provide a score for each hexagon. The resources are scored from one to six and color-coded. High-quality habitat scores a one as the most important area for wildlife and is colored a darker shade, while less crucial habitat receives a higher number and is colored a lighter shade on the map.

“NM CHAT is not meant to prevent people from doing projects in sensitive areas,” Wunder said. “Instead it helps people to know up front if the land they are interested in using contains important wildlife habitat. That knowledge can be the key to a successful project that avoids negative impacts to wildlife, litigation, and expensive setbacks.”

The New Mexico Crucial Habitat Assessment Tool is part of a West-wide effort to map wildlife habitat across the 16 western states. Each state gathered and evaluated its own information. The Western Governors’ Association created the Crucial Habitat Assessment Tool, or CHAT, for states to bring all their habitat assessments together in one place. The website [westgovchat.org](http://westgovchat.org) provides information across all 16 western states and allows users to link directly to available state-specific sites like NM CHAT.

Although CHAT does not replace existing regulations or assessments, the map does allow developers to see quickly how states rate the relative importance of particular stretches wildlife habitat before they commit to a project.

“In the end, both conservation and development can benefit, and that is what we hope to accomplish,” Wunder said.