

NEW MEXICO PUBLIC LANDS **Dispersed Camping** **Guide**



Tips and guidelines for finding solitude on public lands.

SEEKING SOLITUDE

Dispersed camping refers to opportunities that are spread across a wide area rather than a developed site like a paid campground.

With many millions of square miles of federal and state lands to explore in New Mexico, dispersed recreation opportunities abound - if you know where to find them.

This guide will cover some handy tips and agency guidelines for safely enjoying **dispersed camping**, which is one of the best ways to experience the many backroads of Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and US Forest Service (USFS) land. There are many free campgrounds as well that aren't quite off the beaten path, but provide few amenities.



Arroyos quickly become rivers with New Mexico's volatile weather. Camp on higher ground and away from these drainages, especially during the summer monsoon season.

STAYING SAFE

Whether you're an active outdoor recreationist or not, **an ounce of precaution is always worth more than a pound of cure.** Always call to confirm conditions in dispersed areas you plan to travel to, and make sure others know where you're going and when you expect to be back. Be aware of fire restrictions and check for any fire activity nearby.

Know the limits of your vehicle and your hiking skill; don't bite off more than you can chew. Many roads on public lands are accessible only with 4-wheel drive in the best conditions, and flash flooding can turn these conditions on a dime.

Information in this guide is adapted from available general guidance published by land management agencies. Please contact agencies directly for rules pertaining to specific areas.

GENERAL GUIDELINES

For dispersed camping, Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and US Forest Service (USFS) lands will be your best bets. Both of these agencies allow camping along their managed roads with a few caveats.

No matter where you go, expect to pack in all you need, and pack out all you bring. These sites are always first-come, first-served, so have multiple options before heading out!

Bureau of Land Management (BLM)

BLM lands are common throughout most of New Mexico, concentrated in the northwest and southern portions of the state in particular. These lands are subject to multiple uses such as livestock grazing, mining, and more, so selecting a site will require some patience to avoid the infrastructure supporting these activities like troughs, windmills, and other permanent structures. BLM maps and digital map sources from the BLM can help you narrow down a site, but **it's always best call to confirm** if a site is suitable before heading out. Closures for various reasons and road conditions can make an otherwise perfect site unsafe to reach.

From the BLM New Mexico website -

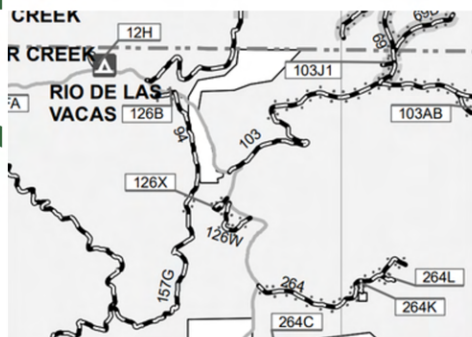
BLM's overall policy is to allow dispersed camping on all the lands it administers with the following conditions and exceptions:

- Dispersed camping is generally allowed on public lands in New Mexico for no more than a period of 14 days within any period of 28 consecutive days. The 14-day limit may be reached either through a number of separate visits or through 14 days of continuous overnight occupation during the 28-day period. After this time period, you must relocate to another site at least 25 miles away. The purpose of this is to prevent damage to sensitive resources caused by continual use of any particular areas.
- Camping is prohibited within 900 feet of any developed water source such as a guzzler or watering trough so that the water is accessible to wildlife and livestock. Please do not park your vehicles near these waters or take any actions that would disturb wildlife or livestock from using these waters.
- Campfires must be attended at all times. Campers must comply with all fire restrictions.
- When using a motorized vehicle for camping access, please park your vehicle near existing roads or existing undeveloped campsites.
- Camping is permitted within all units of the National Wilderness Preservation System administered by the BLM in New Mexico. However, all motorized and mechanized vehicles and equipment are strictly prohibited in these areas. Campers must not dispose of refuse, hazardous materials, sewage, or gray water, in any manner that would pollute the surrounding area. Please pack it out, and dispose of those materials properly.

Individual BLM Field Offices may have additional or supplemental special camping rules or guidelines.

US Forest Service (USFS)

Every National Forest sets their own guidelines to dispersed camping. Generally these rules are very similar, *but some details will vary*. Much of the work in finding dispersed camping on National Forests is done for you. The **Motor Vehicle Use Map** for every USFS unit is available free online and in-person at the ranger station serving the area of interest. These handy maps grade roads by condition, and provide guidance toward dispersed camping areas. Roads lined with dots are open to dispersed camping, and you may find fire rings and sites already cleared for use.



This section of the Santa Fe National Forest Motor Vehicle Use Map shows developed campsites as large symbols, and dispersed camping as dots along National Forest roads. You won't find any camping along state roads, paved highways, or anything not managed by the USFS.

Via the Carson National Forest website, here are the current guidelines for dispersed camping in their areas:

Rules for Dispersed Camping

- Groups of over 75 people who wish to use the forest, need to obtain a special use permit. There is no fee and permits can be obtained at the nearest District Office.
- You need to be self-contained. No amenities are provided such as water, restrooms, or trash cans.
- You may camp in a dispersed area for up to 14 days. After 14 days, you must move at least five road miles for camping in another dispersed area. Campers may not spend more than 14 days of any 30-day period at the same dispersed area.
- Please place your campsite at least 200 feet from any stream or other water source.
- Keep a Pack-In Pack-Out camp. Follow Leave No Trace guidelines.
- Contact the local Forest Service office to see if any restrictions, especially fire restrictions are in place.
- Be Bear Aware. There are bears across New Mexico's forests so camp accordingly.



Our New Mexico Public Lands Directory can get you in contact with all the public land agencies in the state. Use it to call a National Forest for fire restrictions, road conditions, and more.

CAMP LOGISTICS

A Note on Water and Toileting

Water obtained on public lands should always be treated by boiling for several minutes, or using a purpose-built filter or tablets. Untreated water can carry many diseases from wild animals and grazing animals and can make you very sick.

To protect the watersheds from further contamination, all toileting when dispersed camping should be done with "catholes." Choose a site at least 100 feet from any water source, dig a hole at least 6 inches deep, cover it thoroughly and pack out any toilet paper with your trash.



There are more options than ever when it comes to water treatment. Some physical filters use a straw or pump system to siphon water, or are gravity-fed like the system shown.

Other options include UV light or heat treatment. A combination of methods can kill potential bacteria, parasites, and viruses if you are unsure of water quality.

Using Fire Safely

For many, camping just isn't the same without a fire. When camping on public lands, you may build fires if conditions are suitable and there are no current restrictions. Fires must also be limited as much as possible for safety. Here are just a few ways to keep your fire under control:

- 1) Get current conditions and restrictions by calling the ranger station.
- 2) Check [weather.gov](https://www.weather.gov) or other local sources for fire and wind warnings. Wind, high heat and low humidity should make you think twice about starting a fire.
- 3) Pack in suitable firewood, or find dead and down or firewood collection areas on public lands. Properly seasoned wood is suggested if you pack it in, and dead and down can be used in some dispersed areas. Some forests have active logging projects or collection areas for finding suitable wood.
- 4) Choose a site with an existing fire pit if possible. Many dispersed areas have maintained or user-made fire rings made from rock. Make sure they are large enough and in suitable condition. Remove any trash, ash, or other debris from the bottom before lighting a new fire.
- 5) If fire restrictions are in place, or a fire ring can't be built safely, come prepared with a small metal fire pit or a propane-fueled burner.
- 6) Always smother and stir fires with water and dirt before leaving a site. Have a fire extinguisher or a cooler, bucket, or other water source on hand at all times.

Get official updates on fire conditions from nrmfireinfo.com.

THE PATH (MORE OR LESS) TRODDEN

If you don't have a suitable vehicle for exploring National Forest roads, or don't have much experience with dispersed camping, dip your toes in the water with these easily accessible campsites! They may not have camp hosts or toilets, but these fee-free sites are a great option for car camping, camping with kids, or for those who prefer to stay near paved paths.

COSMIC CAMPGROUND - NEAR ALMA, NM

Amenities: 8 tent or RV accessible sites, pit toilets. NO water or RV hookups.



A designated Dark Sky Sanctuary, this first-come, first-served Gila National Forest campground is just a short hop from US-180, and provides a scenic stay any time of year (though winter and summer do reach their extremes in this region). There are some special rules to keep the area suitable for stargazing, including arriving before dark, not interfering with the purpose-built telescope pads, and using red-filtered flashlights when possible. The peak season for stargazing is around summer and fall (May-October).

FORT STANTON - SNOWY RIVER CAVE NCA - NEAR CAPITAN, NM

Amenities: Over 27 paid RV or tent sites, RV hookups available, tables, day use areas, trails, and toilets. Many free dispersed camping options on roadsides.



The Fort Stanton - Snowy River Cave National Conservation Area is home to a historic military fort and one of New Mexico's longest caves. On NM-220 you'll find two small designated BLM camping areas with plenty of amenities, as well as dispersed camping spots on roads between. The Rob Jagers Campground is immediately accessible from the highway while the Cave Campground is a short drive into the BLM lands. These formal campgrounds will have a fee, as will any spots with RV hookups, but many free opportunities are available.

JOE SKEEN CAMPGROUND - NEAR GRANTS, NM

Amenities: 10 campsites off the highway. Toilets, grills, and shade structures.

Not far from Grants on NM-117, this completely free campground is set in the picturesque El Malpais National Conservation Area, full of trails and unique geologic features to explore. The 10 BLM campsites here are first-come, first-served. There is no firewood collection or water available in the area either, so you must pack in your own. This is a fantastic car camping stop to explore this unique area of geologic and historic importance.



ANGEL PEAK SCENIC AREA - NEAR BLOOMFIELD, NM

Amenities: 9 tent sites with tables and grill grates. Vault toilets, no water/RV hookups.



Directly off US-550 south of Bloomfield, this scenic area managed by the BLM has a series of trails to explore the unique landscape dotted with hoodoos, canyons, and jagged peaks. Stay overnight at this free tent only campground, and wake up bright and early to explore the incredible views. If the limited camping sites fill up, there is no shortage of BLM lands within the vicinity suitable for true dispersed camping. Bring lots of water, whatever time of year!

MANZANITA MOUNTAINS DISPERSED CAMP AREA - NEAR TIJERAS, NM

Amenities: True dispersed camping (none). Reservable group camp sites have toilets, fire pits, & trash.

Southeast of Albuquerque, this area of the Cibola National Forest - Sandia Ranger District centered around Cedro Peak is open to dispersed camping along certain roads. There are also several group camp sites you may reserve if amenities like fire pits or bathrooms are needed. You must consult the map of this area to find the dispersed camping roads, but there are many sites in the area to pick from. Off-highway vehicles are heavily utilized in the area, so while you may not get much peace and quiet during the day, there are plenty of trails to explore by vehicle or by foot.



PUBLIC LANDS
INTERPRETIVE
ASSOCIATION

The NM Mobile Visitor Center is a program of the Public Lands Interpretive Association, a 501(c)3 nonprofit dedicated to inspiring and educating the public about America's public land resources.



Visit our website for more Mobile Visitor Center resources featuring digital downloads of our publications including:

- NM Dispersed Camping Guide**
- NM Responsible Rockhound Guide**
- NM Public Lands Directory**
- NM Public Lands FAQs**
- Digital Tools for NM Public Lands**

publiclands.org/pages/new-mexico-mobile-visitor-center

*Black Range,
Gila National Forest*

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