



Director Christopher Nolan (center) on the set of *Oppenheimer* in New Mexico.

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## A PERFECT PRODUCTION CLIMATE

**NEW MEXICO'S MOTTO, "*CRESCIT EUNDO/IT GROWS AS IT GOES*," REFLECTS THE STATE'S PROGRESS AS A HUB FOR FILM AND TV PRODUCTION.**

INTERVIEW BY LISA Y. GARIBAY AND ADRIAN GOMEZ

The first film ever shot in the American West was 1898's *Indian Day School*, filmed on New Mexico's Isleta Pueblo by Thomas A. Edison, Inc. Since then, the state has consistently been featured on screens large and small, in productions ranging

from mayonnaise commercials to 2023's *Oppenheimer*.

The state's status as a well-appointed, go-to hub began to rise after hosting major productions like Marvel's *The Avengers* and the highly acclaimed series *Breaking Bad* and *Better Call Saul*.

More recently, New Mexico has played host to Showtime's *The Curse*, Peacock's *Poker Face*, Netflix's *Ransom Canyon* and *Stranger Things*, Amazon's *Outer Range*, Fox's *The Cleaning Lady*, Apple's *The Lost Bus* and A24's *Eddington*.

The state offers more than 300 days

of sunshine annually and terrain from pine forests to vast, open deserts. While New Mexico's latitude classifies it as a southern state, high elevations like Wheeler Peak's 13,161 feet mean that many parts of the state experience all four seasons. Depending on the location, production in summer can be cool while production during winter may be sunny and bright.

Looking beyond the weather, it's clear that the Land of Enchantment—as New Mexico is nicknamed—possesses the investments, infrastructure, financial incentives and expert crew to be a driving force within the film and TV industry.

## THE STATE

New Mexico became the first U.S. state with a film commission in 1968. Since then, the state film office has built up a suite of resources for out-of-state productions, including a locations database and a directory of New Mexico businesses that have experience working with the film industry, from hospitality to accounting to props. The state's film liaison network links productions to knowledgeable representatives who are available to assist with locations and permitting in specific locales.

AMC's lauded series *Dark Winds* has just wrapped its third season in New Mexico. When the show began production in and around the Navajo Nation in 2021, director and executive producer Chris Eyre said, "There is no better community or location that could properly serve the authentic storytelling, look, and feel necessary for *Dark Winds*. This was our first and only choice, and we're overwhelmed with the abundance of phenomenal talent and crew we are able to work alongside here."

New Mexico native Melanie Kirk has more than 25 years of experience in the industry, with producing credits that include *The Harder They Fall*, *The Terminal List* and Nickelodeon's *The Really Loud House*.

"I've been able to double New Mexico for almost anywhere in the world—Boston, Austin, Australia, Arab countries—all because we have these unique locations," Kirk says. "We have forests, deserts and back alleys. I can make any location happen in New Mexico."

"Going from episodic to feature film goes hand-in-hand," she adds. "New Mexico offers me the flexibility to accomplish both types of projects."

## THE SAVINGS

Producer and educator Mateo Frazier emphasizes another major selling point for New Mexico: The cost of doing business is lower. Pricing for studio space is thousands of dollars cheaper than filming in Los Angeles or Atlanta.

"Filming in New Mexico helps us meet our goals monetarily," Frazier says. "We're able to get more bang for our buck."

The state's streamlined permitting process also benefits the

budget. "We're able to move through cities quickly without too much hassle. If we can film many locations throughout a shoot day, that saves us money," Frazier adds.

In 2019, Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham successfully spearheaded legislation to expand the incentive program and propel the state's film industry forward, including establishing official state film partnerships with Netflix, NBCUniversal and 828 Productions, all of whom have committed to doing business in New Mexico for at least a decade.

New Mexico offers a 25 to 40% refundable tax credit on eligible expenses, including resident cast and crew salaries and eligible purchases from New Mexico businesses. The state's 25% base credit applies to films (including shorts), TV projects (including pilots), commercials, animation, video games, webisodes, music videos, informercials, mobile apps and even stand-alone postproduction.

An additional 5% tax credit is available if certain criteria are met when filming a television series or a pilot. Another 5% tax credit is available for using qualified production facilities, of which there are more than 20 throughout the state.

A 10% tax credit—also known as a rural uplift—is available for qualified expenditures in New Mexico areas at least 60 miles beyond the Santa Fe and Albuquerque city halls.

The Nonresident Below the Line Crew (NRCE) program in New Mexico offers a tax credit equal to 15% of wages paid to certain below-the-line crew members who are not residents of New Mexico and who contribute directly to the production of films or commercial audiovisual projects in the state.

## THE PLACES

The New Mexico capital city of Santa Fe has been a jewel of breathtaking scenery, art, cuisine and culture for centuries. The first UNESCO-designated Creative City in the United States offers a robust film office and experienced professionals well versed in making various productions feel at home.

"The studios are looking for incentives, resources and crew. It's important that we can provide them with services," says Jennifer LaBar-Tapia, director of the Santa Fe Film Office, which serves the capital and northern region of the state. These services include a vetted list of qualified film vendors that is constantly updated. Three studios and six movie ranches in and around Santa Fe fall on the state's qualified production facilities list for the 5% tax credit.

For example, Aspect Studios is a state-of-the-art film production campus that was born from the merger of Midtown and Garson Studios. The new studio is the largest in northern New Mexico, featuring six soundstages totaling approximately 75,000 square feet and nearly 90,000 square feet of office and production support space.

LaBar-Tapia herself is a tremendous resource for productions coming into the region. In a story for the *Santa*

## Netflix Studios Albuquerque.



*Fe New Mexican*, *The Curse* producer Josh Bachove said, “Jennifer goes way above and beyond compared to other film office commissioners.

“She knows everyone in town and is always willing to make an introduction. She is also an incredible reference for crew and locations and restaurants and accommodations,” Bachove added.

Located about an hour’s drive southwest of Santa Fe, Albuquerque sits almost at the heart of New Mexico. It became a hotspot for filming as *Breaking Bad* became a cultural juggernaut in the early 2010s. A handful of daily direct flights connect the city to the LA region in less than two hours. Direct flights are also available from other production hubs, including Atlanta, Chicago and New York.

Since 2019, Netflix has directly invested nearly \$575 million in New Mexico productions. “Our continued investment in this region underscores our commitment to the local community and New Mexico’s vibrant cultural and economic landscape,” said Netflix Co-CEO Ted Sarandos in a recent announcement about the expansion of Netflix Studios Albuquerque.

Netflix’s expansion brings their soundstage total to 12 and adds three mills, a production office, two stage support buildings and two dedicated backlot areas across 108 acres. Cinelease plans to double its footprint of stages and ancillary buildings around the city. The recently announced Mesa Film Studios will include six soundstages, production office space, backlot, mill space and a permanent blue screen upon its completion over the next several years.

Albuquerque’s Hanover Studios offers a 25,000-square-foot stage, with a major facility in the works. The Studios at the Journal Center offers a 23,146-square-foot stage, a 21,000-square-foot mill space, dock access, and a 10,000-square-foot space for production offices.

In the southern New Mexico city of Las Cruces, 828 Productions operates three of the state’s qualified production facilities: Calcot/Hayner Soundstage, which includes over 30,000 square feet of space; Miranda Soundstage, a 7,000-square-foot facility; and SFM, a 9,984-square-foot facility.

Las Cruces is quietly yet steadily rising as a production hotspot. Recent productions include 2024 Sundance Film Festival U.S. Dramatic Grand Jury Prize winner *In the Summers*, TV series *Ghost Hunters*, Plan B Entertainment’s *Olmo*, the Netflix-Tyler Perry film *Joe’s College Road Trip*, and *Summer Machine*, a highly anticipated project produced by George R.R. Martin.

“It’s approximately 25% less for location fees, craft service, building materials, costume, and prop rentals compared to Northern New Mexico,” says Andrew Jara, a film liaison who helps run the Las Cruces Film Office.

Las Cruces also offers one of the nation’s most robust and competitive cost savings packages by adding a 10% rebate on top of those offered by the state.

“This not only helps to spread the economic benefits of film production beyond the urban centers but also provides a compelling financial reason for productions to explore and showcase New Mexico’s diverse landscapes and communities



Monette Moio and Josh Brolin on the set of *Outer Range*.



outside the main metro areas," Frazier says.

While it's safe to assume that the majority of a production's crew and equipment will need to come from the Albuquerque area, a growing number of experienced pros and resources are based in Las Cruces. The Gold Room Prop House is run by experienced art directors, production designers, and set decorators. 603 Productions rents industry-standard grip and lighting equipment, from individual items to full trucks. Experienced liaisons like Andrew Jara help productions lock down top-notch crew, cast and services.

Las Cruces is just an hour's drive on Interstate 10 from El Paso International Airport in west Texas, where cast, crew, equipment, and supplies can be flown in. Productions can tap into the resources and talent available in Texas' sixth-largest city, and for those wishing to explore Mexico, several U.S.-Mexico border ports of entry are within a one- to two-hour drive.

Also within an hour's drive is famed White Sands National Park, a breathtaking sea of white gypsum sand that has a long history of appearing in films, TV series, commercials and music videos.

As well as serving as film commissioner for Luna County in southern New Mexico, producer Troy Scoughton heads up PRC Productions, which has shot 15 feature films and a handful of series in the state. Under Scoughton's direction, the film commission is working to build the county's first soundstage.

"All of the tax incentives add up," Scoughton says. "For a small production, we could get back enough for a budget for

postproduction or marketing."

Tribal communities throughout the state—including the Zuni Pueblo, Ohkay Owingeh, Taos Pueblo and the Mescalero Apache Tribe—have all been home to film and television productions since 2019. *Dark Winds* has generated notable spending in Tesuque Pueblo and continues to grow the local infrastructure.

In 2020, the pueblo turned its shuttered Camel Rock Casino into Camel Rock Studios, which became the first studio owned by a Native American tribe. The state film office works with the tribes and productions to ensure that filming is done respectfully and with cultural sensitivity.

## THE SUSTAINABILITY LANDSCAPE

Albuquerque's film office is proud of the resource hub it has put together for film and TV productions in partnership with the city's sustainability office. The directory contains resources to help productions shoot green while supporting the city's Climate Action Plan, which outlines recommended strategies to counter both local and global effects of climate change.

"Film productions have the potential to positively affect climate change by making both small and large changes to reduce their carbon footprint," says Cyndy McCrossen, Albuquerque Film Office liaison. "We're a resource for productions in Albuquerque and want to make the connections between productions and local businesses that provide sustainable services."

The city has made it easier for productions to work sustainably by connecting them to places where leftover food can be donated, eco-friendly dry cleaners, solar-powered generator rentals, electric vehicle rentals, and organizations where sets and costumes can be donated once production has wrapped, thus keeping a significant amount of material out of landfills.

Local companies like Kindora Big Deal Productions provide set restoration and trash and recycling services for film, TV and commercial productions throughout New Mexico. Soilutions offers composting to divert organic waste from landfills. On the power front, Desert Synergy carries VOLTstack portable, zero-emission battery electric energy storage systems.

Tax credits are available from the Alternative Fuel Data Center, including a biodiesel tax deduction and biofuels production tax deduction. The program is headquartered in Albuquerque, but productions in Santa Fe are beginning to take advantage of it.

Netflix's Albuquerque campus now has a 5-megawatt solar array coupled with a 3-megawatt battery storage system. "We can take advantage of the sunshine and store it for when it's dark at night to eliminate all emissions from our electricity loads," says Netflix Sustainability Officer Emma Stewart.

For heating and cooling, Netflix just looked downward.

On the set of *Dark Winds* in New Mexico.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF AMC

"We bored 506 holes 300 feet deep to tap into the earth's natural heating and cooling," Stewart explains. This process eliminates all gas usage and will allow the studio to keep extreme temperatures at bay during hot summers and cold winters. The studio also invested in 50 electric vehicle charging stations.

"At Albuquerque, the durability of the investments is strong, and we can support any productions that shoot there," Stewart says. "The projects are able to take a big bite out of pollution. Solar advancement means that we can cover 100% of electrical loads. The geothermal will cover 30% of the heating and cooling."

Based on availability, third parties may rent the Netflix facilities and become eligible for the qualified production facilities 5% tax credit.

## THE PEOPLE

The state's film office estimates that approximately 75% of all positions hired by productions are New Mexico residents. Job opportunities have increased dramatically over the past decade. Netflix alone hired over 4,000 cast and crew members in New Mexico from 2021 to 2023. Stats

like this help explain why Albuquerque, Santa Fe and Las Cruces have been named three of the best places to live and work by *MovieMaker Magazine*.

With the volume of production that New Mexico has seen in recent years, skilled crafts personnel are critical. IATSE Local 480 has approximately 2,000 members. "We have department heads available in each of the 20 departments that we represent," says Bryan Evans, business representative for IATSE Local 480.

Additionally, 1,400 people in the process of becoming members sit on a union-approved overflow list to be hired if there are not enough IATSE members to fill spots on a production.

Evans is proud to argue that New Mexico crews are the best in the country. "I am constantly hearing praise about the quality and work ethic of our crew. They know how to work hard, get the job done accurately, and do it in a fun way. There's a laid-back culture of New Mexico that is extremely conducive to film," he says.

Evans is also proud of the union's commitment to professional development, which not only benefits New Mexicans seeking to build a career in production, but also



Writer-director Billy Luther with *Dark Winds* costars Kiowa Gordon and Zahn McClarnon on set in New Mexico.



productions that need a solid crew base to count on.

"Our training center provides over 150 classes a year. People can get the entry-level skills to get their first job, but more importantly, go from one skill level to a higher one," Evans says.

New Mexico's Film Crew Advancement Program (FCAP) offers significant cost savings to participating production companies that provide on-the-job training to New Mexico residents working primarily in below-the-line positions.

A production company is reimbursed 50% of a participant's wages for up to 1,040 hours physically worked by the qualifying crew member in a specialized craft position. FCAP participants must be mentored to be part of the program. For example, a grip who is ready to move up to the best boy position would qualify so long as the production's key grip serves as their mentor.

"New Mexico has always been a haven of creativity. People here intuitively know how to do creative projects and do them really well. There's an incredible wealth of creative people that is just waiting to be tapped into," Evans says.

"We're definitely growing where everyone else is shrinking," he adds. "We're the fourth-largest movie market. We want to become the second—if not the first."

## TOP TIPS FROM A NEW MEXICO PRODUCER

New Mexico resident Jake Pokluda has served as the UPM on *Dark Winds* for two seasons. His 20+ years of experience includes *Love Lies Bleeding*, *Echo 3* and *News of the World*. Pokluda is thrilled to have watched his home state evolve as a production powerhouse. Here are his top tips for producers eyeing his state for their project.

### #1 Talk to a local UPM

"I don't say this with any bias, but you should talk to a local UPM before anything. Have them get you in touch with a good locations manager, an AD and a transpo person. Sometimes I'll hear from a production that drove around without talking to anybody and decided to shoot in southern New Mexico. But now they've got to figure out how to get everything down to that part of the state and house everyone and so forth. If they had talked to a UPM first, they could have learned more about alternative locations and logistics before making a decision."

### #2 Don't discount local crew

"A key grip in New Mexico is as good as any key grip in New York or LA. The same with most crew. We shoot a lot of major stuff here, from Marvel to *Oppenheimer*, and that has really trained and seasoned the crews. There are great local DPs, production designers, and ADs. You have top-notch camera teams that will nail your shot every time. You have great department heads here. The support crew is phenomenal."

### #3 Have a local arrange your lodging

"We have great travel coordinators and travel services here in the state, which you get a rebate on. They can help me house all my crew for better rates than if I did it myself online."

### #4 Get big savings by going green

"We went with GreenLite's solar-powered trailers on our latest project. They were phenomenal. I never ran a base camp genny to power my cast trailers. I would plug them in at the stage occasionally to charge up the batteries, but for the most part, the sun did the work. I saved a ton in fuel alone just on my cast trailers. GreenLite matched the price for me, so it didn't cost me a penny more (than traditional trailers). Cutting down on fuel use at base camp was a phenomenal savings."

### #5 Take full advantage of locations

"There's a lot of urban variation. For example, you can double parts of LA in Albuquerque. If you're looking for different landscapes close to a city center, there's no better place than New Mexico. There are tremendous open spaces, and you don't have to go far to get there. You could be headquartered in Albuquerque and within 20 minutes be in a place that looks like you're on another planet." ■