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EPA Recognizes Lower Santa Fe River Water Quality Success Story
Collaborative Restoration Efforts Revive Vegetation and Water Quality

(Santa Fe, NM) – The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has recognized the Lower Santa Fe River as a success story for the collaborative work that converted a mostly barren impaired stream to a thriving riparian corridor. The restoration is the result of several projects from Santa Fe’s wastewater treatment plant off Airport Road to Cochiti, and was conducted by several partners in cooperation with the New Mexico Environment Department (NMED) Surface Water Quality Bureau.

“The transformation of the Lower Santa Fe River is truly remarkable,” said Environment Department Secretary Dave Martin. “I applaud the City and County leaders, state and federal agencies, water protection groups, and all the volunteers who came together to restore this important riparian area.”

In 1998 the Lower Santa Fe River was added to the state list of impaired waters because it could not support its designated uses of marginal coldwater fishery, warmwater fishery, and livestock watering. The wastewater treatment plant discharge and livestock with access to the stream led to pH, sedimentation, dissolved oxygen (DO), chlorine, and total ammonia levels causing the impairment.

Restoration efforts transformed the impaired reach from an erosion-prone, barren area into a lush preserve with abundant riparian vegetation and wildlife (see figure below). The transformation was a result of several projects that began in 1997 when the WildEarth Guardians collaborated with the Santa Fe Municipal Airport to install fencing to keep grazing livestock away from riparian areas and prevent them from roaming onto airport runways. Exotic non-native vegetation was removed and native vegetation planted – more than 5,000 cottonwood trees and 15,000 willow trees. Additional fencing, levee removal to allow high flows to reach the floodplain, wetland creation, plantings, and outreach and education activities were crucial to the restoration effort. Shading, bank stabilization, and water quality markedly improved.

The Santa Fe City Council passed a resolution that recognized the ecological significance of the river segment by establishing a Rural Protection Zone, and encouraged its protection and restoration. That section of the river flows perennially through the preserve as a result of constant discharge from wastewater treatment plant, which provides the primary source of flow.

“The collaboration for this project should serve as a model for future projects across New Mexico,” added Martin. “I look forward to building on these successes as we protect and improve New Mexico’s water resources in the years to come.”



The Lower Santa Fe River below the Santa Fe wastewater treatment plant before (1997) and after (2004) restoration.

Link to EPA Success Story: [EPA Success Story: Lower Santa Fe River](#)

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