

ABQJournal Online » Santa Fe River Thriving After Restoration Effort

Ten years ago, a four-mile stretch of the Santa Fe River west of the airport was a barren arroyo. Today it's lush and dense, with a healthy stream and animal life, including beavers.

A throng of officials, including Nancy Stoner, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's acting assistant administrator for water, met Wednesday at the river to celebrate the project that brought it back to life.

In 2001, work began to restore vegetation along eroded Santa Fe River banks, with about \$200,000 provided by the federal government under the Clean Water Act.

"What's remarkable to me is not so much the natural environment as the spirit you see when people work together on these kinds of projects," Stoner said.

In the 1990s, a Clean Water Act monitoring program determined that the Santa Fe River downstream of the wastewater treatment plant near the Santa Fe Airport had too much fine sediment, not enough oxygen and a wildly fluctuating pH, according to Abe Franklin, New Mexico Environment Department watershed project manager.

In the early aughts, a plan was crafted to address these issues, and funding was approved through the Clean Water Act. Since then, Santa Fe environmental activist group WildEarth Guardians has teamed with local students (several from Santa Fe Indian School were on hand Wednesday) to plant thousands of cottonwood trees and willows along the river.

"This is one of my favorite places in the world," said John Horning, executive director of WildEarth Guardians. "It's been wonderful to watch it transform over the years."

The river was also kept free from grazing and was narrowed slightly, Franklin said, which makes for a more gravelly flow preferred by insects.

Santa Fe Mayor David Coss called the river restoration "a Clean Water Act success story" and said it was his favorite project in Santa Fe. (The project was completed in 2005, though the vegetation has grown significantly since then.)

"My big challenge is restoring the watershed inside the urban area," he said, noting that the river runs dry above the wastewater treatment plant.

Stoner is visiting New Mexico from Washington, D.C., to take part in the National Environmental Justice Advisory Council public meeting in Albuquerque. She said she came to Santa Fe because she was interested in seeing how the EPA-funded restoration project had turned out.

"I want to demonstrate what it's accomplishing," she said. With the federal government haggling daily over what programs to cut in the wake of nationwide economic despair, "maintaining funding in these programs is a challenge," she said.

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