



Questa seeking state funds for Red River watershed planning

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The village of Questa has submitted an application to the state for funding of a watershed plan for restoration on the Red River. The ultimate goal is to bring a spectrum of partners together to identify pollution sources on the beleaguered river and create a framework for future restoration projects.

“This river runs right through our village, and all of us should be concerned about our watershed,” Questa Mayor Esther Garc'a said in an interview Tuesday (May 1). “I think we need to have that river healthy again so people can use it.”

The planning area for the grant proposal would include 30 miles of the Red River and its tributaries, which have been identified as “impaired waters.” While problems on the Red River are often associated with the molybdenum mine near Questa, recent studies by the U.S. Geologic Survey have shown that the river upstream of the mine is also suffering, in part because of erosion of naturally occurring aluminum into the watershed.

Historic mining activities, increased off-road traffic and septic system issues have also been identified as contributing pollutants up and down the river.

The planning area for the village’s grant would cover everything from the headwaters of Placer and Pioneer creeks (above the town of Red River) to the Red River’s confluence with the Rio Grande — about 75 percent of the river’s 189square-mile watershed.

The grant the village is seeking is funded under Section 319 of the federal Clean Water Act. The grant pays 60 percent of the project costs, while 40 percent must be met by though alternative funding sources or in-kind services. The village was awarded \$90,000 in capital outlay funds during the most recent legislative session to put toward its match on restoration planning.

The core team identified in the grant application include project manager Ron Gardiner (who drafted the grant), planner and facilitator Rosemary Romero and education coordinator David Gilroy.

A request for proposals was issued by the Environment Department in February. The Questa village council voted to approve and submit the application in April. The Questa molybdenum mine, now owned by Chevron Mining, is in the early stages of Superfund remediation monitored by the Environmental Protection Agency. That cleanup involves work at several mine sites, including the removal of millions of tons of waste rock left over from open pit mining. That job is expected to begin soon, but could take decades and cost upwards of \$800 million.

Proponents of the 319 grant argue the Superfund process is only aimed at reducing the threat of further contamination and does nothing to restore the quality of the river.

The application, sent to the New Mexico Environment Department, cites 75 potential stakeholders from various governments, businesses and organizations who could contribute to the planning effort. Those partners includes entities as varied as Chevron Mining, environmental group Amigos Bravos, and local acequia associations.

"I think the time is overdue to address the restoration of the Red River," Gardiner told *The Taos News* Tuesday (May 1).

Gardiner said he had letters of support for the grant from 20 groups, including the Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management and UNM-Taos. "That's a pretty stout lineup of support," Gardiner said.

Discussions on the health of the river in Questa are often plagued by acrimony over the degradation caused by the Questa mine. As the area's principle employer, the mine is a flashpoint for dispute and infighting, even if the causes of the river's problems go beyond waste rock or mine tailings.

Gardiner believes the bickering has distracted from the fundamental issue of environmental quality, and he stresses the need to overcome political differences and focus on fixing the river.

In a letter of support from Amigos Bravos, projects director Rachel Conn agreed that there is a "great need" for a collaborative effort on the Red River. "Red River watershed stakeholders have historically had many different voices and opinions about water problems and solutions, therefore a cohesive inclusive planning effort to bring those voices together could have a tremendous benefit to the watershed," Conn wrote.

Last year, a similar application for 319 funds from the village of Questa was denied by the Environment Department. In a letter to mayor Garc'a, a representative from the state explained that the application was denied because, among other things, some team members and stakeholders "did not convey strong partner commitment."

The rejection letter from the state specifically mentioned the Red River Restoration Group (R3G) — a Superfund-sponsored organization meant to communicate with the community about the Superfund process but that has often been at odds with the village council. The group held a symposium on the health of the Red River last year and recently wrapped up an educational initiative at Questa schools that focused on the mine's impacts and on the watershed.

The Red River Restoration Group was not listed as a partner in the 319 grant application, but its program director, Patrick Nicholson, was included as a potential partner. Both Gardiner and Nicholson said they had the best interests of the river at heart, and both said they tried to find common ground but couldn't agree on whether the village was the best applicant for the grant.

Nicholson said he was "surprised" that the village went forward with the 319 application without his organization's full support, especially given the reasons the state gave for denying the application last year. Nicholson called the village's approach "exclusionary and bound for failure."

Gardiner said the door was open for the Red River Restoration Group to come on board.

Nicholson said his group would consider offering assistance if the grant was approved, as long as the village showed “a willingness to collaborate.”