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Two Taos rivers on list of impaired waters

By Matthew van Buren

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Water sampling by two local groups has found E. coli, ammonia, dissolved oxygen and conductivity exceeds water quality standards in the Rio Fernándo and Rio Pueblo de Taos, leading to impairment listings for both rivers.

Amigos Bravos and the Water Sentinels sampled surface water quality at 17 sites between May and September 2011.

“On all three sampling dates there were sites in both the Rio Fernándo and Rio Pueblo de Taos that did not meet standards for dissolved oxygen and electrical conductivity,” a sampling report states.

Water Sentinels organizer Eric Patterson said the testing began about five years ago and is continuing to expand. He said he likes to fish and grows organic vegetables, so like many others in the county he feels particularly connected to the water.

“We use that water, we need that water, and we need it clean,” he said. “Water is important culturally and economically.”

According to the report, the Rio Fernándo “did not once” meet standards for dissolved oxygen or electrical conductivity.

“For the parameters that were tested, no exceedances of water quality standards were detected in the Rio Hondo,” the report states.

Amigos Bravos Projects Director Rachel Conn said dissolved oxygen impairment is caused by an excess of nutrients in the water and can lead to large algae blooms. She said algae put oxygen into the water during the day but that there is a “drastic bottoming out” of oxygen levels at night; if levels get too low, fish aren’t able to breathe.

“We are getting very low readings,” Conn said. “It can be a major problem.”

According to the report, three sites were added along the Rio Pueblo last year to monitor the impacts of the Taos Regional Wastewater Treatment Plant, including on an unnamed arroyo that carries water from the plant.

“The results indicate some serious water quality issues in the perennial unnamed stream below the wastewater treatment plant,” the report states. “Specifically, there were exceedance of water quality standards for E. coli, ammonia, dissolved oxygen and conductivity.”

At a June 20 Rio Pueblo de Taos Watershed meeting, Conn said tests have found “a lot of problems in the past” below the plant.

“We’ve found some really high numbers,” she said.

She said construction at the plant may have led to some problems but that a new membrane system should help — particularly as fewer neutralizing chemicals will be needed.

Conn told more than a dozen people gathered at Town Hall, June 20, that Amigos Bravos hopes to create “a more meandering channel” and wetlands along the arroyo. She said Amigos Bravos is also focusing on temperature impairments in the Rio Pueblo.

“The whole river is too warm,” she said.

She said the nonprofit is seeking a grant to address the Rio Pueblo and an unnamed arroyo; she also said the town has provided a letter of support and a “substantial match” of heavy equipment and operators. “That was a really exciting development,” she said.

The testing has led to the state Environment Department and Environmental Protection Agency’s acknowledging that impairments exist and the addition of the Rio Fernándo and Rio Pueblo to the state’s 303(d) list of impaired waters, required under the Clean Water Act. Conn said the listing can help bring funding to address the rivers.

“Our sampling results have led to the listing of the Rio Fernándo de Taos as impaired for E. coli and (dissolved oxygen); the Rio Pueblo de Taos as impaired for E. coli in the upper portion; and the unnamed perennial arroyo that flows below the wastewater treatment plant as impaired for ammonia and (dissolved oxygen),” Conn wrote. “Once streams are listed as impaired for certain parameters, federal funding becomes available for watershed planning and restoration projects.” Conn said more monitoring is necessary to pinpoint the source of problems along Taos County’s waterways so they can be properly addressed. She said the groups will be expanding testing to the Red River this year, as well.