

Mine closure puts renewed focus on Red River restoration

By J.R. Logan

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For years, restaurant owner Brett Lewis would buy fish to stock the Red River so tourists would have something to catch when they'd come to town. As a bonus for making a bulk purchase Lewis would get a lunger thrown in with the batch. But Lewis says the hatchery-raised brute never stood a chance in the swift current of a river that looked more like a bar ditch than a meandering mountain stream.

Growing efforts to restore sections of the Red River could change that by making the river more inviting to anglers. And with the recent closure of the Questa mine, local leaders say making the river more attractive is now more important than ever.

"We have to focus on changing our whole economy, and I think river restoration is going to be a big component of that," said Mark Gallegos in an interview with *The Taos News* last week.

The town of Red River plans to apply for state grant money to restore trout habitat on about 1,800 feet of river that runs through the middle of town. If approved, that project would compliment another 1,800 feet of river restoration done on a nearby section of river on the west side of town late last year.

The town's efforts are mirrored downstream by another river restoration project that aims to create a fishing park at Eagle Rock Lake and improve trout habitat east of the Red River Fish Hatchery. All told, those two projects would encompass nearly two miles of river. The group behind those planned projects includes state and federal agencies and an well-heeled economic development board funded by Chevron and intended to diversify Questa's economy.

"We would like to do the whole Red River reach — from the headwaters all the way to the Rio Grande," said Russell Church with the town of Red River.

To do that, Church says the first step is to get grant money to come up with a plan that identifies problem areas and prioritize places that have restoration potential.

Leaders from Questa and Red River are now coming together to figure out how to tackle a restoration project of that scale, and that sort of cooperation could be key to finding funds and support for future projects. "We have to get all the stakeholders on board with this," Church says.

The state Environment Department claims fishing contributes an estimated \$6.5 million to communities in the Red River watershed — namely Red River and Questa.

The role fishing plays in the Red River economy comes as no surprise to Church. In fact, he points out the town budgeted \$23,000 last year to buy fish to stock in the river. The state and the chamber of commerce also add stockers to the river. But because of the lousy habitat in town, Church says a lot of those fish are swept downstream.

“Over the years, just with the development and the growth of the community, the river has been pushed up against the side of the mountain” Church says. “So it’s wide, and it’s shallow, and there’s no holding water for fish.”

Because of the river’s current lack of structure, there’s isn’t much for fisherman who want a challenge, Church says. Instead, fishing in and around town usually consists of a dozen people hanging around the same pool pulling out stocked fish almost as fast as they’re put in.

By Church says adding structure to the river, and planting trees and bushes along the river bank would give fish a place to hide and hold. The work that was done last fall includes big rocks and a few “lunker boxes” meant to hold bigger fish.

Church acknowledges that the completed project was a low-hanging fruit. It was on town-owned property, the money basically came to the town from the state without much effort, and the construction area wasn’t plagued by some of the natural challenges that exist elsewhere on the river.

Downstream from the town, the river is exposed to “scars” in the steep canyon that occasionally flush mud and heavy metals into the river. Legacy pollution leftover by mining activity is also decades away from being resolved to the standards of federal regulators.

“There will be some challenges, but it’s nothing that’s out of reach,” Church says.

“There are parts of that river that can be a really great trophy fishery,” says Eric Frey, a fish biologist with the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish. He says sections of the river between Red River and Questa will always be plagued by mudslides and other acts of nature, but he says focused restoration efforts could eventually create a sustaining population of trout.

The Environment Department recently released a request for proposals to do river restoration that improves recreational opportunities, and thus local economies. Church says the town is looking for about \$500,000 from the state through that program to finish the project in the heart of town. If it gets the grant, Church says actually work in the river could take place as soon as next spring.