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Illegal dumping threatens Northern New Mexico's sensitive sites and waterways

By Margaret Wright, *The New Mexican*

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It's garbage day in a picturesque swath of Northern New Mexico, and plastic trash bins line both sides of the highway that runs along the Rio Chama between Espanola and Abiqui. Down a narrow county road that follows the valley's slope toward the river, the newly emptied bins are stationed at the ends of dusty residential driveways, open lids flapping.

Also fluttering in the breeze is a trash bag tossed in the middle of an arroyo bisecting a section of the road. It has bulged open and loosed its contents: wadded-up paper, dirty diapers, plastic bottles.

Long after aggressive anti-littering campaigns helped clean up many roadsides and public areas in the United States, illegal dump sites continue to fester across New Mexico. The signs are readily apparent in Rio Arriba and Taos counties, where arroyos and streambeds that funnel into two of the state's major rivers are marred by old mattresses, discarded refrigerators and clusters of everyday household garbage scattered among the sagebrush. Waste managers and environmentalists say the dumping is a side effect of life in economically depressed rural areas that are still adjusting old habits to contemporary kinds and quantities of garbage.

The sight of heaped trash is all too familiar to Anne Baldwin, an archaeologist for the U.S. Forest Service's Espanola Ranger District. West of State Road 84 lies a patchwork of Santa Fe National Forest land, Bureau of Land Management property and tribal land scarred by illicit all-terrain vehicle trails. As part of her work with the Santa Fe National Forest's Site Stewards Program, Baldwin treks out to check on protected and historically significant sites. They range from decrepit horse corrals to clusters of ancient Puebloan dwellings. Baldwin said it's been upsetting to encounter what she describes as a "phenomenal" amount of illegal trash dumping all around them, including at a large site considered to be ancestral by the nearby Ohkay Owingeh tribe.

"It shows absolutely no respect," she said.

Yet, as a resident of Rio Arriba County, Baldwin said she knows how hard it can be to get rid of trash that doesn't fit within the county's rules for pickup service, which allows for three bags or a total of 96 gallons. "It's expensive and hard for people to comply, so they drive out to arroyos and dump their trash there," she said.

North Central Solid Waste Authority Manager Gino Romero said it's a huge problem all over New Mexico, but Rio Arriba County has its own unique set of challenges.

Historical perspective is key to understanding the battle against illegal dumping in the area, he said. “This is a very old community, and back in the day, people used to deal with their trash themselves. We were very conservative about what we threw away.” People burned scrap paper and cardboard in metal barrels in their yards; fed food scraps to their chickens, dogs and farm animals; and repurposed worn-out clothes.

Today, Romero constantly snaps photos of waste discarded throughout the county’s mountainous terrain — piles of household garbage, broken furniture and appliances, a rotting cow’s head. Many people don’t understand why they have to pay to throw things away, Romero said, “and Rio Arriba does have one of the most expensive trash systems in the state of New Mexico because we do door-to-door service throughout the county.”

It’s a huge undertaking, and not only because residents are scattered across wide expanses. In a county where the poverty level tops 20 percent, residents choose between paying \$198 for a year of pickup service or \$18 on a monthly basis. There’s a half-off discount for seniors, and people who pay their fees also get between two and four free permits to drop off loads at one of five collection centers in the county. But many face a long drive to the nearest collection center, and to drop off a truck bed of trash without a permit card costs just under \$10. Many residents were vocally upset when service rates were raised recently, but Romero said the hikes were necessary for the trash agency — which is subsidized by the city of Española and the county — to remain solvent.

There are other financial issues as well.

“We still have quite a few people who are not paying or (who are) delinquent,” Romero said, “and as we carry those people to debt, we still continue to pick up their trash. Plus, there’s no landfill nearby. We have to haul our trash 84 miles to Rio Rancho. That’s a huge expense.”

A good recycling program would help, but the county can’t afford one yet. “All the recycling is done by the customer that cares,” Romero said. “We don’t have a recycling system that does pickup, which would make it easier for people to reduce waste at the landfill.”

Edward Martinez, the solid waste director for Taos County, said he sees similar scenes play out in his jurisdiction, which charges \$120 per year for trash service. His self-sustaining department just had to raise its rates from \$100 per year, around the time the landfill upped its fees for big loads. The one county enforcement officer does his best to patrol in problem areas and track down illegal dumpers, but a little discarded trash attracts more. In some places, the accumulation is overwhelming.

In a tract of forest originally part of the historic Cristbal de la Serna Land Grant, a community cleanup effort earlier this month cleared 28 tons of trash in one day. Clean water advocacy group Amigos Bravos was one of the groups that organized the event, and interim executive director Rachel Conn said the volume of waste they encountered in just that one area was sobering.

Household waste fluids, hazardous and toxic chemicals, biological waste, oil and hydrocarbons gradually leach out of the trash, “and it all flows into our watersheds,” Conn said. “Here in Taos County, it drains into the Rio Grande. This is the water that’s used for drinking water downstream, including in Santa Fe and Albuquerque, and it’s used in irrigation across the state.”

The Taos Junction Bridge near the southern border of Taos County marks where the Rio Grande flows downstream after intersecting with many of its most important tributaries. Researchers have consistently measured high concentrations of polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCBs, in the tissue of fish caught there, Conn said. PCBs were components of common industrial products until they were banned in 1979 because of their link to severe health problems such as liver damage and cancer.

Bruce Thomson, director of The University of New Mexico's Water Resources Program, said the improper disposal of household hazardous waste — paint, pesticides, herbicides, automotive fluids and oils — also presents a severe water quality problem. Meanwhile, plastics and other non-biodegradable materials clog up waterways and reservoirs. Asbestos and other chemicals seep from construction waste. Rotten food and animal carcasses send bacteria, including salmonella, downstream.

"Whether it's an animal body or yard waste, as it degrades, the bacteria consume the oxygen in the water, and you end up with a body of water that's anaerobic, without any oxygen," Thomson said. "Fish kills come from that. In Albuquerque, there are a couple of places where storm water accumulates, detritus settles out, and we occasionally have anaerobic conditions."

Public land managers remain largely dependent on volunteers for the cleanup of illegal dump sites, and when it comes to stemming the flood of garbage, Romero and Martinez agree that education and outreach to young people are among their most powerful tools. Both men make presentations in local schools about recycling and the importance of disposing of trash properly.

"We try to teach that if we contaminate the water here, everyone downstream is affected," Romero said.

He said that until technology catches up to the amount of waste people produce, it's also a matter of shifting their shortterm thinking. "People don't go to Walmart and think, 'If I buy that trampoline for my kid, someday I'm going to have to throw that away, and it'll cost me 10 or 15 bucks.'" Martinez, who is also an avid hunter and fisherman, said he hopes continued public education, code enforcement and penalties for dumping will help ensure his grandchildren and their offspring are able to enjoy the same refuse-free public lands he remembers when he was growing up in Taos. Because of the newly authorized federal Clean Water Rule, intermittent and ephemeral streams that run dry much of the year are now subject to stricter protections, and people who get caught dumping can now face federal fines on top of local ones.

The Santa Fe New Mexican is a sister paper of The Taos News.



Katharine Egli

Justin Guadian, left, and Marcos Chavez help clean a major illegal dumping site in Miranda Canyon as part of Amigos Bravos River and Lands Cleanup held June 13.