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Influx of corporate dollars could mean more restoration in Valle Vidal

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Upper Vidal Creek is a pretty spectacular place to make a sales pitch.

The half moon basin perched at 9,500 feet in the Valle Vidal, about two hours northeast from Taos, is a vast expanse of meadow that funnels into a narrow choke of granite outcrops. By mid-October, the grasslands have dried to a tawny brown and aspens scattered on the ridge tops are half-dressed in gold leaves.

That awe-inspiring vista brought a caravan of white government trucks and SUVs to the basin Oct. 12. At a pullout on a bumpy two-track near the basin ridge-line, a handful of corporate representatives, state bureaucrats and some of the Forest Service's top brass stepped out to soak it all in.

For 15 years, a grassroots effort has made great leaps in restoring the Comanche Creek watershed. Water quality has been improved, making things more comfortable for the beleaguered Rio Grande cutthroat trout. The work has been led by the Santa Fe-based Quivira Coalition, with help from other nonprofits, government agencies and plenty of volunteers.

Now, those same organizations have attracted the interest of deep-pocketed corporations like Coca-Cola, which has already put hundreds of thousands of dollars into restoration. Now those groups, Coca-Cola and their government partners, are hoping to convince corporations like Intel and Facebook to also pitch in.

Many experts see wetland restoration — especially in this high country — as key to increasing resilience in the face of climate change. If precipitation extremes do become more frequent, wetlands would act as buffer to tone down those effects. Using corporate donations to draw even more funding to the valley appears to be a promising way to actually get that work done.

Shaky history

When Bill Zeedyk saw the Valle Vidal for the first time in the late '70s, he found a landscape in tatters. The high mountain meadows had been grazed to near nothing. Around 2,500 head of cattle were left to wander and wallow in the stream and the marshy wetlands. Meanwhile, the Pacific Stud lumber company hauled away millions of board feet of timber, carving haphazard roads every 150 feet to get at anything they could reach.



Representatives of the Forest Service, state agencies, nonprofits and corporations discuss the restoration potential of Upper Vidal Creek during a tour this month.

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The Comanche Creek watershed on the Valle's southern half was in especially rough shape. "It was ravaged," Zeedyk said.

In 1982, the Valle's then owner — Pennzoil — donated the 100,000 acres to the Carson National Forest. At the time, Zeedyk was working for the regional Forest Service office in Albuquerque. He helped broker the transfer, and he was part of the agency after to curtail the damage. The Forest Service immediately reduced livestock numbers from 2,500 to 850, and logging roads were systematically closed.

Then, in 2001 the fledgling Quivira Coalition got involved, in large part to help the R'o Grande cutthroat trout, which was teetering on the edge of an endangered species listing. Such a listing likely meant draconian land use restrictions that no one wanted.

The Quivira Coalition found grants to pay for stream restoration, and Zeedyk (now in his post-bureaucrat role of a stream restoration guru and consultant) helped rejuvenate lower sections of Comanche Creek by planting willows and stabilizing stream banks to lower water temperature and reduce erosion. The relatively modest grant money was supplemented by volunteers who showed up one week a year to do their part.

The work appears to have made a difference. Restoration work has recently shifted from not only helping the water quality, but increasing water quantity as well. To scale up, conservationists are going to need a lot more support.

This is an excerpt. For the full story, go to taosnews.com.



A log dam on Upper Comanche Creek prevents water from leaking out of a wetland, improving water storage capacity and making the watershed more resilient.

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