



# THE TAOS NEWS

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My Turn

## Amigos Bravos: Our work to restore the Rio Fernando

By Joe Zupan

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I would like to take this opportunity to describe the work of Amigos Bravos and other entities to improve the Rio Fernando watershed, an important resource to the Taos community. In a My Turn column in *The Taos News* June 28, our erstwhile ally (in years past) Mr. Jerry Yeargin expressed significant criticism of our work and our approach in this arena.

Amigos Bravos is a statewide organization dedicated to protecting and restoring the waters of New Mexico. Founded 30 years ago, our initial efforts were focused on impacts to the Red River and Rio Grande from the Molycorp mine in Questa.

Since then, our mission has grown to include issues and watersheds that are statewide. Current examples include our work at Los Alamos Laboratories to address the impacts of historical contamination in the Rio Grande, fighting the reopening of the Mount Taylor “zombie” uranium mine, successfully suing the Bureau of Land Management to keep oil and gas exploration out of the Santa Fe National Forest, fighting the various schemes to add diversion structures on the Gila River and many other issues besides.

Some years ago, concerns about the headwaters of the Rio Fernando brought forward by people like Mr. Yeargin caused Amigos Bravos to take a close look at this river and put some careful thought into ways our organization could help to address the problems. In partnership with Water Sentinels, we initiated a sampling program on the Rio Fernando, and we have sampled the river every year since 2007.

We have used the sampling results to advocate for policy changes and funding. We were successful in getting the state to list the Rio Fernando as impaired for several parameters, which made available restoration resources. For more than four years we have been hosting discussions among stakeholders including grazing permittees, the Forest Service, elected officials and concerned citizens to discuss the sources of pollution and potential solutions. In 2016 we secured funding to begin a comprehensive watershed-based planning program to quantify concentrations of E. coli, a bacterium present in animal and human waste and to identify E. coli sources and potential restoration projects.

Last year, thanks to funding from the LOR Foundation, we, along with other organizations and entities that include the Taos Land Trust, Taos Valley Acequia Association, town of Taos, the Forest Service, Taos Soil and Water Conservation District, Taos County and The Nature Conservancy formed the Rio Fernando Revitalization Collaborative to bring the Rio Fernando back to life. We have been working together for a year to get important river and acequia projects done on the Rio Fernando.

I'm very proud of the collaborative's efforts to achieve a manageable consensus.

This year, we have secured significant additional funding from the federal Environmental Protection Agency and other funders to more closely evaluate the sources of e. coli contamination. Working with a highly specialized laboratory, we have commenced a sampling program that will actually “fingerprint” e. coli measurements and identify the species they come from, whether human, elk, beaver, cattle, and so on.

We expect for this analysis to inform the work of the Rio Fernando Collaborative, enabling us to more closely target appropriate remedies at various locations in the watershed. We also have a significant ongoing project, funded by the Rio Grande Water Fund, to restore the wetlands at top of the watershed, an area I believe is of particular interest to Mr.

Yeargin – and to us. All of this is to say, our work on the Rio Fernando is an extensive multiyear effort that we believe will yield dividends for the community with an improved watershed. This year, approximately 44 percent of our organizational budget is focused on this single watershed, a huge commitment for an organization managing numerous projects statewide.

I’m therefore a bit confused by Mr. Yeargin’s My Turn column. Over the years, he has expressed his opinion many times about how what we are doing might be “better” or “different,” and we have incorporated some of his critiques into our planning. However, it seems to me that his real issue is with U.S. Forest Service policy, particularly as it relates to grazing in the upper watershed.

Having gained no traction with the Forest Service to change its national policy in this regard, Mr. Yeargin is now resorting to escalating his criticisms of our work. He is certainly free to do so. Meanwhile Amigos Bravos will continue our work with our partners in the Rio Fernando Revitalization Collaborative to restore the water quality and function of the Rio Fernando watershed.

*For the Rio, Joe Zupan is executive director of Amigos Bravos.*

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