



THE TAOS NEWS

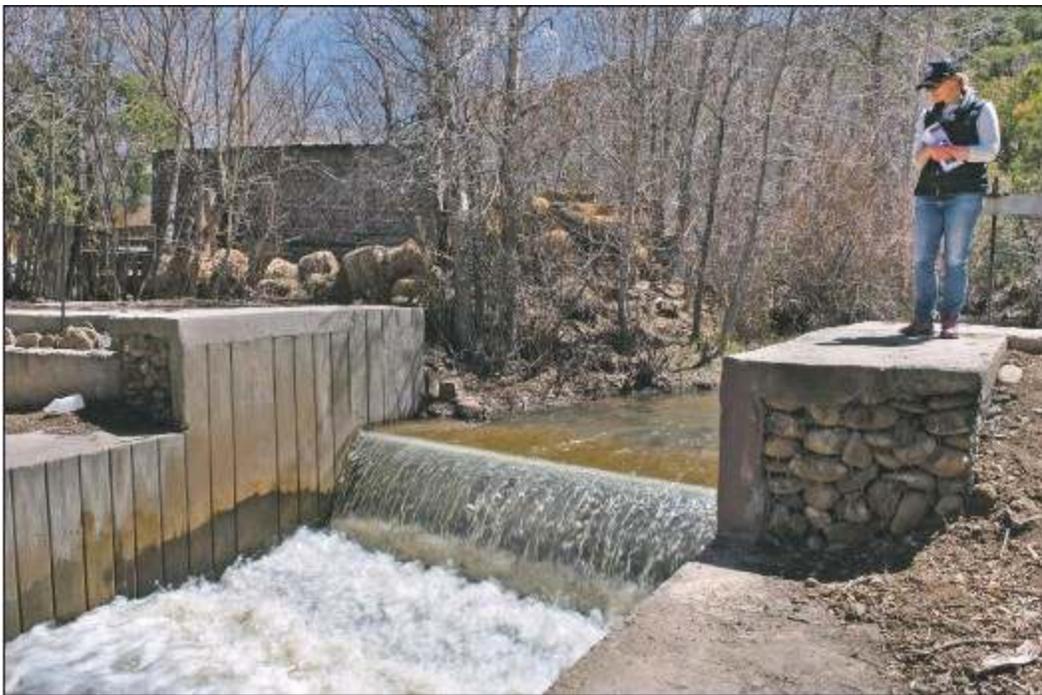
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‘Ready to give everything’ to the río

Surprising alliance of groups tackle problems on Río Fernando

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Amigos Bravos Programs Director Rachel Conn watches the flowing Río Fernando on Tuesday (April 16) during a river tour with University of New Mexico students.

The sound of water flowing across acres of high-mountain grass rose up from the sloshy field near the top of Taos Canyon.

The Río Fernando de Taos starts a few miles upstream from here. But when the stream hits the La Jara field, the río fans out. For a moment, it's not a band of river cutting through the grass, but an obvious wetland, saturated by the gloriously wet spring.

“This is an amazing amount of water,” said Rachel Conn, projects director of Amigos Bravos, a statewide water advocacy organization. “To see it soaking up this spring runoff ... we want to see more of this.”

Listening to the babble and gurgle of snowmelt, it's hard to imagine the river not flowing. Yet even during relatively wet years, torrent slows to trickle, and then, in the middle of Taos, the río eventually goes dry.

From the headwaters near La Jara Canyon all the way down into the town, a surprising alliance of organizations — from the regional acequia association and environmental nonprofits to the Forest Service and cattlemen — are working to improve the river's wetlands and water quality, shore up the ditch infrastructure and bring the river back into people's lives through parks and chances to play by its banks.

In short, they're working together to bring the river "back to life."

Tackling challenges with collaboration

The Río Fernando de Taos is a challenged river.

It is among the most "impaired" waterways in the state of New Mexico. Different issues trouble the upper, middle and lower parts of the watershed: mountain wetlands drying out, notable levels of E. coli, and places where a road is practically the bank of the river, making it easy for sand, gravel and vehicle pollutants to fall right into the main channel of the river.

"It's struggling, polluted, and agricultural systems need infrastructure work and repairs. And there's a need for more public places to connect with the watershed," said Conn.

Still, Conn said, "The whole community depends on this river system."

And it was that simple realization about two years ago that led the handful of organizations with ties to the river to sit down together, look at the biggest problems and think of ways to tackle them collectively.

Herman Manzanares, a cattleman who runs his cows in the pastures around the Río Fernando in the upper parts of Taos Canyon, recalls the tensions that defined the conversations around the river just a few years back.

Used to be, he said, "Everybody was knocking heads with everybody. Everyone had their own way of doing things."

That started to shift when a major nonprofit started talking about funding a project in Taos, one that was defined by collaboration and focused on the watershed. Folks got together to talk about the river, and they got excited, said Conn. Then the funding fell through and the nonprofit pulled out.

But no one wanted to squander the momentum that got everyone together, so they decided to keep going. They formed the Río Fernando de Taos Revitalization Collaborative.

Today, the partners include the Taos Valley Acequia Association, Taos Land Trust, Amigos Bravos, The Nature Conservancy and Trout Unlimited, along with the town of Taos, Taos County and the U.S. Forest Service.

“We’re super-excited about the collaborative,” said Kristina Ortez, executive director of Taos Land Trust. “This is a perfect representation of folks coming together to focus on such an important water source in our community.”

‘Expanding our expertise’

Trying to work on an entire watershed is a daunting, complex task because a watershed is more than just the river.

The watershed is also the plants and animals in the water, along the banks and in the fields surrounding it. The watershed is the health of the forest that the river runs through. The watershed is how the water gets used, either in ditches or the more hidden mechanics of recharging the aquifer that feeds wells and domestic water systems.

Siloed projects are no way actually to do the work on the scale needed to restore the ecosystems of the Río Fernando.

Much of the first year of the collaborative was focused on building the ties between the groups. Besides getting together on occasion to do all the wonky hallmarks of nonprofit work — visioning, planning, strategizing — the groups also got together to learn from each other about each piece of the river system, like the wetlands, acequias, forests and fire risks.

“We’d all be trying to do these project individually,” Conn said. “This is expanding each group’s perspective of the watershed, and expanding our expertise.”

And that shared knowledge, coupled with a shared vision that was forged by honest conversation and a good deal of compromise, has led to actual restoration work in each part of the watershed.

“We created something bigger than the sum of the parts,” Conn said.

On the ground

In the upper part of the watershed, near the La Jara fields where earlier this week Conn marveled at the amount of spring runoff, much of the focus has been on the wetlands.

To many people, the areas at the top of the canyon might not look like a wetland. There are no pond reeds, cattails or standing water. But the grassy fields where cattle graze are wetlands nonetheless, “little reservoirs, sponges that soak up the runoff and release water over time,” Conn said.

Many of the wetlands are degraded.

In some areas, the river has cut a deep channel into the fields, like those just a quarter-mile below La Jara Canyon where the river sits about five feet below the rest of the surrounding field. When that happens, Conn explained, the river is essentially separated from the wetland, and the wetland starts to dry out. Dryland plants start to move in, which shifts the ability of the fields to store water.

And that, of course, impacts everything downstream.

Amigos Bravos has been working on the wetlands for many years, but the collaborative is attractive to funders, and that has meant that the conservation group has been able to get more money to do the work needed in the upper parts of the watershed.

One project that will soon be underway is the replacement of a fence in a grazing allotment downstream from La Jara.

Manzanares, the cattleman, keeps his heard of about 130 animals in the allotment from late May through September, he said, when the high-mountain environment has grass enough to feed the animals.

The fence in one of those areas, the “Riparian Pasture” that stretches on either side of Río Fernando, has long been a problem. Fences take money and labor to maintain and neither Manzanares nor the Forest Service, which owns the land and oversees the grazing, have had enough of either to keep the cows reliably out of the river.

But Amigos Bravos was able to get about \$120,000 to replace the fence. Instead of wooden posts and barbed wire, it will be a larger, metal fence that needs little maintenance. Work on that fence, Conn said, should be starting this spring after the fields dry a little.

The group has also received money to address some of those deep cuts in the wetlands. Once all the approvals are done, they can hire a contractor to help the river meander through the fields, which over time will help the wetlands better do their job of cleaning and storing water.

Peter Rich, a Forest Service planner who was involved in the early parts of the collaborative, said, “Empowering these partnership and actively participating in working groups such as the Río Fernando de Taos Collaborative, an example of only one among many where the Carson National Forest is active, cultivates pertinent dialogue and creates positive outcomes on topics of shared community interest well beyond the forest’s boundaries.”

In the middle part of the watershed — particularly, right at the mouth of Taos Canyon by the Forest Service trails off of U.S. 64 — the Río Fernando de Taos Collaborative got money to help out the acequias.

The collaborative received about \$40,000 to replace the headgate where several of the ditches that pull water from the Río Fernando begin. A newer headgate makes it easier for acequia bosses to control more precisely the amount of water making it down the ditches.

Getting money was easier because so many groups bought into the importance of that one critical piece of acequia infrastructure. “It’s been great, all working together toward the same end,” said Vicente Fernandez, mayordomo of the Acequia Madre del Sur del Cañon and the Río Fernando representative to the Taos Valley Acequia Association.

“This gives me hope we can fix the problems that river’s having,” he said.

Further downstream, after the Río Fernando flows under Paseo del Pueblo Sur through the busiest part of Taos, it runs through the old farming property and wetlands of the Taos Land Trust, adjacent to Fred Baca Park.

This is where the land trust, another member to the collaborative, is creating the Río Fernando Park. The idea is to have more green spaces accessible to more Taoseños. The park, once open, will be of a wilder variety than existing parks.

Through the collaborative, the land trust got about \$40,000 to plan the park, and with that plan in hand, got more than half a million dollars to actually create a park where agriculture and wetlands are part of the experience.

“There’s no question for me we’ve been able to leverage the strength of the partnership to get the funding we need to make this park a reality,” Ortez said.

So far, that money has paid for restoration to the wetland on the property — moving boulders and trees so the river meanders and cleans the groundwater like it did 100 years ago. And it’s paid for a crew of young people to help restore the Vigil y Romo Acequia, a ditch that had been dry for half a century; water finally flowed off the Río Fernando and into that ditch earlier this month.

“It’s so powerful to see water move down an acequia that hasn’t functioned for decades, to see kids working and playing,” Ortez said.

Since the acequia started flowing, “We’ve had to reconfigure our time and priorities here at the land trust. Time shifts when you’re moving that water. You have to be ready to give everything to it.”

What’s next

Though a wet year like this offers plenty of chances to see the river at its best, much work remains to restore the river so that, as a watershed, it’s functioning as well as everyone in the collaborative believes it can.

In the upper stretches of the river, Amigos Bravos will be funding even more improvements to the La Jara fields, trying to undo the damage of the cuts that slowly dry and degrade the mountain wetlands.

The organization also got money to start sampling for the bacteria *E. coli* — not just where it’s present, but from what source. The old battle in the canyon has been between the cattlemen and the homeowners, with the former blaming septic tanks and the latter blaming the cows. With funds secured through the collaborative, Amigos Bravos will finally have data to nail down the source, be it cows, human waste or sources from elsewhere in the watershed.

The land trust is pushing ahead with developing the park and the development of a comprehensive watershed plan is now underway.

But to achieve those largescale goals will take even more collaboration to find solutions to the other problems that plague the river: invasive species that erode the native flora along the río, properties with junk right above the river, and roads, like Los Pandos, where debris runs directly into the waterway below.

And it will take even more buy-in, especially from the people who live along the river and know intimately each small part.

“Our strength comes from working together,” Ortez said. “And working through our most challenging challenges.”