

Alamosa River Watershed Project

by Jeff Stern

There's a lot of talk these days in the conservation community about the importance of grassroots-driven resource management. In the Alamosa River watershed, this talk is being translated into action.

A 13-member watershed steering committee picked by area residents has worked for nearly two years to address problems in the troubled, 127,000-acre Alamosa River watershed. The committee includes local water users, landowners and government officials.

The Alamosa River Watershed Project is sponsored by the Conejos County Soil Conservation District. Key concerns are restoring portions of the river straightened 25 years ago, and enhancing water quality.

A stretch of the Alamosa River near Capulin was straightened in the early 1970s to prevent flooding in the tiny town. The river's natural meanders were blocked.

This set in motion a calamitous chain of events. The velocity of flows increased which dug a deeper channel. Stream banks became unstable, sedimentation increased, local water tables dropped and riparian areas were dewatered.

Irrigation headgates have been left high and dry above the river's deepened channel.

In early November 1996, two erosion-control demonstration projects were installed in the river. The work was supervised by nationally-recognized experts in river restoration. Showcased are in-stream rock work to deflect flows from vulnerable stream banks and structures, willow and cottonwood plantings, and riparian grazing management.

Project supporters include area landowners, local ditch companies, Conejos County, the Alamosa-LaJara Water Conservancy District and the Rio Grande Water Conservation District. This work should serve as a model for restoring erosion-plagued streams throughout the Rio Grande Basin.

The watershed committee also advocates effective clean-up of the Summitville Mine, located on the tributary of the Alamosa River. Acidic, metals-laden pollution from the mine wiped out the fishery that once existed in Terrace Reservoir and threatens the future of agriculture in the watershed. *Jeff Stern is a Technical Advisor for the Technical Advisory Group (TAG) overseeing cleanup efforts at Summitville and owns Valley Environmental Services.*