

CONSERVATION Showcase

Cleaning Up Yesterday's Trash

Remember when dad hauled all the old cars, tires, and other household appliances down to the creek and lined the banks to stop erosion? In these more environmentally conscious days, it is hard to comprehend that such a practice was seen as beneficial. And, today's farmers and ranchers are faced with the laborious task of fishing all that trash out of the creeks and riparian areas, if they want to bring a healthier environment back to the land.

Sunny Hill, who manages Rainbow Ranch in Union County, New Mexico, notes they have removed tons of tires from the Dry Cimarron River. The conservation and restoration work has not stopped there. The ranch has been working since 2000 with the Clayton Natural Resources Conservation Service Field Office and Quivira Coalition as well as the center for Holistic Management, to use stewardship and enhancement of the natural resources as the primary filter through which all decisions and practices must pass before implementation.

The riparian area conservation work on the ranch has been done under the tutelage of Bill Zeedyk with his designs and engineering expertise. The Dry Cimarron River runs the length of the property (about three miles). There have been numerous low-tech structures installed in the river course including post vanes, picket weirs and baffles, rock baffles, and "one-rock" dams. Along the banks they have planted thousands of willows in pole plantings and bundles. In the upper drainage areas, to mitigate erosion, there are a variety of control structures that have been used including Zuni rock bowls, "one-rock" dams, and hay bale structures. All of these structures are designed to work with the natural flows of water in the river and drainages. The goal is to mitigate the damage from previous practices and allow the natural processes to do most of the work of restoration.

With the assistance of the local NRCS staff, an area of a riparian area on Rainbow Ranch has also been planted with cottonwoods that were supplied by NRCS's Los Lunas Plant Materials Center.

The Quivira Coalition has conducted many "hands-on" workshops on the ranch to accomplish much of the actual work needed for the installation of these structures and plantings. The goal of these workshops is two-fold. The work gets done and those doing



it learn how and why. People with very diverse backgrounds and interests have participated, from environmentalists to ranchers and farmers to federal and state employees. Rainbow Ranch was just one of the participants in a 319 grant (distributed by the New Mexico Environment Department) administered by the Quivira Coalition for riparian restoration and educational outreach.

Heidi Karr, a science teacher at the Des Moines High School, as part of her work with the New Mexico Youth Conservation Corps this last summer, engaged the group in a "working classroom" at the ranch. They had a tour of the riparian restoration work done previously and then gained some "first-hand" workshop experience by helping to build a drainage control structure along the upper river bank and make some repairs to a picket weir and baffle in the river. The Clayton High School principal also has plans for a day of environmental education. A major goal of Rainbow Ranch is to share the knowledge and experience they have gleaned, and continue to gain through this ongoing process, via educational outreach efforts to the general community.

"I'm always excited to have people, especially young people, come learn about what we are doing to restore and enhance this land which supports us all," said Sunny Hill.

"After removing thousands of tires, as well as all of the remedial work to the immediate area, this drainage has really turned around," said Ernest Romero, NRCS Clayton District Conservationist.

The land has abundant grass coverage, erosion has been mitigated, and willows are taking hold. It is conservation practices like those at Rainbow Ranch that are bringing the land back from the days of old cars, tires, and refrigerators.