

CONSERVATION Showcase

Conservation Concepts Fit Like Hand in Glove

Watershed conservation, forest management, cooperative conservation, and inclusion of the historically underserved are all concepts that fit like a hand in a glove in the Tierra y Montes Soil & Water Conservation District in northern New Mexico. Adoption of numerous conservation practices by the Alexander Milliken Ranch is a case in point.

When Milliken purchased the meandering ranch near Las Vegas, New Mexico four years ago much of its forest was clogged with overgrowth, and the spread had just two wells that only pumped one gallon per minute. The ranch totally encompassed the Agua Zarca Watershed which is a tributary of the Gallinas River, and the Gallinas provides much of the water supply for the Las Vegas community.

After the ranch was purchased, ranch manager, Kenny Alderete, turned to an eager cadre of local, state, and federal agencies, as well as relying on the ranch's own resources, and began the task of putting the best conservation on the ground for the ranch. The Tierra y Montes Soil & Water Conservation District, using a grant from the New Mexico State Forestry Division, assisted with funding to do forest stand improvement thinning. The USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) aided as water sources were developed, pipeline laid, cross fencing installed, and prescribed grazing management practices adopted.



"I never realized how valuable cross fencing is," said Alderete.



Kenny Alderete

The work partitions the rolling terrain of the ranch that is on the edge of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, and provides the infrastructure needed for prescribed grazing management on a mixture of forest and open meadows.

While one of the goals of Milliken is a cattle operation, other aims include catastrophic fire prevention, enhancement of wildlife habitat, and water resource development. The forest stand improvement thinning is reducing the fuel load in the forested areas and in doing so lowering the chances of a catastrophic forest fire. With the reduction of small diameter timber that absorbed the water resources, the

ranch now has six wells that pump 300-400 gallons a minute. Wildlife that is benefiting from the increased forage and water sources include elk, turkey, deer, mountain lion, and bobcat.

Alderete's stewardship has included leaving windrows of slash because wild turkeys use their shelter to nest. In July, after the chicks have been raised, the slash can then be chipped.

The community leaders of the Las Vegas area have on many occasions aggressively sought economic development opportunities for their population – a population that meets the NRCS definition as historically underserved. The Milliken Ranch has made firewood available to area residents – and the wood use efforts have extended well into the community. The small diameter timber makes ideal firewood at a time when energy prices are of concern.

The New Mexico Forest Industry Association and Las Vegas-San Miguel Economic Development Corporation have organized Las Vegas Wood Cluster meetings to help encourage networking in the industry so participants can learn about contracts, grants,

trainings, conferences, and workshops.

The Milliken Ranch conservation work is not an isolated effort in the Las Vegas area, and now the 2008 Farm Bill is offering new opportunities and focus that will benefit the landscape scale advancements there. The new forest management and historically underserved provisions of the 2008 Farm Bill are tailored made for the area. The Adelante Resource Conservation & Development Council, based in Las Vegas, is developing a Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative grant application to further the water quality enhancement aspects of this large scale work. In the project Adelante will partner with the U.S. Forest Service, NRCS, Tierra y Montes, NM State Forestry, and private landowners for conservation improvements in the Gallinas and Tecolote Watersheds.

Nestled on the eastern flank of the Sangre de Cristos, the Agua Zarca and Gallinas Watersheds share an incredible beauty, and the Tierra y Montes SWCD, NRCS, NM State Forestry Division, and all others mentioned here are helping to get conservation on its ground.