



Alamosa Trees *by Marilyn Loser*

How's the Rio Grande doing in our area?

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I had no idea what the Rio Grande Headwater Restoration Project was until a few weeks ago. Since I'll show up, whenever I can, to help plant trees, I found myself, shovel in hand, along the river just north of Carroll Woods in north Alamosa on a very windy April day.

Heather Messick, RGHRP Coordinator, explained that the project's goal is to improve the health and function of the Rio Grande along the 91-mile stretch from South Fork to the Alamosa-Conejos County Line. On that day, the water level was low and the river gently meandered. It was hard to imagine that, along this stretch of river, 2-3 feet of 15-foot high, sandy banks eroded each year, sending an incredible amount of sediment down river.

Several hundred yards of the banks on either side of the river had been shaped to a gentle slope. Rock structures were then constructed in the channel bottom to deflect the current back into the main channel.

Messick explained that bank-holding vegetation was slowly returning in upper sections of the river, restored in previous years. Our project was to kick start the natural process. Last October, the Sargent Future Business Leaders of America planted bundles of willows along the riverbank.

Our group planted small trees and shrubs purchased from the Colorado State Forest Service along the bank. RGHRP planted more trees and shrubs along the other side of the bank in the Alamosa Ranch in the afternoon – more than 250 total. Two species, Narrowleaf Cottonwood and native willow, came as potted plugs and were set directly in the sandy soil in water-holding basins. Bare-rooted species included caragana, chokecherry, sumac, Nanking cherry, golden current, red-osier dogwood, and wax current. The bare roots were first dipped in into a polymer/water solution that had the feel of hair gel and held reserves of water for the new plantings. The bare-rooted plants were clustered and about five planted in each water basin. All individual trees and clusters were watered and surrounded by wire mesh to keep the critters away.

Messick said, "This is the first year the RGHRP purchased trees and shrubs and we are anxious to see which species will have the highest success. This experience will allow the RGHRP to improve our revegetation efforts on future projects." Not only will the trees and shrubs help stabilize the riverbank, they will provide animal habitat.

"A study completed in 2001 characterized the function of the Rio Grande and recommended measures that could be taken to improve the health and function of the river," says a RGHRP publication. A group of concerned San Luis Valley citizens (including ranchers, farmers, environmentalists, irrigation company representatives, local, state and federal agency staff members, and elected officials) initiated the study.

The study hasn't just gathered dust on a shelf. Based on this study, the RGHRP has administered five cost-share streambank stabilization and riparian restoration projects on forty-four sites with \$1.8 million in grant money, according to Messick.

“The projects have aimed to improve river function using a multi-faceted approach to riparian restoration and streambank stabilization and have resulted in the treatment of almost seven miles of streambank,” said Messick. “Including contribution from project partners and landowners, the total value of the streambank stabilization and riparian restoration projects is \$2.2 million. The projects are a cooperative effort between private, state, and federal entities and the non-profit RGHRP. The techniques that are used include bank and channel shaping, revegetation, installation of rock and wooden structures, and implementation of grazing best-management practices.”

The San Luis Valley has changed a lot in the past 120 years, as has the use of the Rio Grande. A RGHRP publication states its mission is “to restore and conserve the historical functions and vitality of the Rio Grande in Colorado for improved water quality, agricultural water use, riparian health, wildlife and aquatic species habitat, recreation, and community safety while meeting the requirements of the Rio Grande Compact.” This is quite a challenge. It makes my efforts at planting a few trees and shrubs seem small!

If you'd like to help or for further information please contact Heather Messick at 415 San Juan Ave., Alamosa, 719.589-2230, Hmessick@rams.colostate.edu.

“And how should a beautiful, ignorant stream of water know it heads for an early release - out across the desert, running toward the Gulf, below sea level, to murmur its lullaby, and see the Imperial Valley rise out of burning sand with cotton blossoms, wheat, watermelons, roses - how should it know?” Carl Sandburg, “Good Morning America”, 1928