

By AVELINO MAESTAS

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Undersecretary for Agriculture Mark Rey joined area ranchers, Forest Service and National Resources Conservation Service employees and others at an Earth Day event in the Burro Mountains on Monday.

The group celebrated a cooperative project among the Grant Soil and Water Conservation District, area residents, and the USFS and NCRS to improve the watershed within the Mangas Valley.

Dusty Hunt, a conservation district board member, said the project was necessary to restore a balance in the watershed.

“Because the Mangas watershed has lost its equilibrium with Mangas Creek,” Hunt said, “we’re seeing a lot of erosion.”

The solution: bring fire back into the ecosystem.

After decades of wildfire suppression, the density of piñon and juniper in the area increased. According to Hunt, that prevented native grasses from pulling rainfall into the watershed, and led to the creation of arroyos that channel water into Mangas Creek. The resulting runoff carried nutrients and other sediments into Mangas Creek and, eventually, the Gila River.

“The case we made to the Environmental Protection Agency,” Hunt said, “is that we could return equilibrium by reintroducing fire into the system.”

During the past several years, project partners completed a number of prescribed burns, totaling more than 55,000 acres, in the Mangas watershed area. In addition, more than 250 erosion control structures were completed along rills in the watershed.

The difference has been drastic. Bruce Anderson, a biologist with the Gila National Forest, told the Daily Press his agency was “very supportive” of the type of habitat restoration the Mangas project fostered.

“We’re seeing tremendous results,” Anderson said. “We’ve been doing this since 2000, and we’ve seen a very definite increase in the amount of deer use in these areas, as well as many of the other species.”

Hunt was quick to point out the cooperation of the various agencies and organizations involved in the years-long project.

“Probably not one entity could have pushed this project forward,” he said, “but any one of them could have stopped it.”

It was that cooperation that prompted Rey’s visit. He said that the Mangas restoration served as a model for the Department of Agriculture, which has pushed for additional funding for such projects. According to Rey, the federal, state and local agencies involved had “essentially demonstrated the essence of cooperation in conservation projects.”

“The project has proven to be a highly effective means, on almost a pilot project basis,” Rey said, “of erasing political barriers where mixed landownerships are involved, to accomplish landscape-scale conservation work.”

Rey said the Department of Agriculture was promoting such approaches in proposals submitted to Congress earlier this year.

“In breaking new ground, the cooperators here ... have provided the inspiration and ideas for some new approaches that we have proposed to Congress as part of the administration’s 2007 Farm Bill,” he said.

According to Rey, that proposal includes \$720 million per year for conservation projects. Of that, \$420 million will go toward the Environmental Quality Incentives Program.

EQIP funding helps farmers and ranchers deal with problems associated with air, water, soil and other natural resources on their land. It aims to help curb pollution, reduce soil erosion and protect habitat for at-risk species.

The Mangas project has been funded through a variety of courses, but mainly by grants established under Section 319 of the Clean Water Act. According to David Hogge, New Mexico Environment Department program manager for the Watershed Protection Surface, more than \$3 million in 319 funding has been spent in the Gila River Basin, with additional funding applied toward the Mimbres and San Francisco rivers.

Mike Matush, NMED line manager, said the Mangas project was unique beyond the cooperation exhibited by the project partners.

“We’re probably one of the only groups out there that look at the whole watershed or landscape to fix one surface water body,” he said, “because, in this part of the country, you have to look at the whole watershed to fix that one perennial stream.”

EQIP money may be key to continuing work in the Mangas Watershed.

“What we’ve found,” Matush said, “is that a lot of the agriculture producers are in these kinds of areas that need help with surface water quality. That’s why we can combine 319 and EQIP, and help small farmers along the river channel.”

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