

Trust formed to protect Rio Grande flows

Publish Date: January 13, 2005 |

The Desert-Mountain Times

By Andrew Stuart

Staff writer

A group of West Texas residents this week announced the formation of the Trans-Pecos Water Trust, a private nonprofit that will seek to protect flows in the Rio Grande and its tributaries through the acquisition of water rights.

“We are dedicated to finding a way to make sure the Rio Grande always has water,” board president and Terlingua resident Mike Davidson said, “but we want to make sure to do it in a way that benefits riverside landowners, as well as fish, wildlife and recreation.”

The group intends to protect and improve flows and riverside habitats on the so-called “Forgotten River” stretch of the Rio Grande, which extends from Fort Quitman east of El Paso to the Amistad Reservoir near Del Rio. River flows along the stretch of river are often very low.

“This new organization is a key component to long-term river health that hasn’t been addressed before,” Davidson said. “We definitely consider this a long-term project.”

The group hopes to raise funds and acquire water rights through donations, leases and purchases, as well as to assist landowners with improving spring flows that feed into the Rio Grande. Davidson said the group plans to acquire water rights from landowners who are not using them, and he emphasized that all transactions would be voluntary.

Initial funding for the group was provided by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation and The Nature Conservancy.

In addition to Davidson, board members in the group include: Albert Miller, a Valentine-area rancher and Jeff Davis County groundwater district board member; Caroline Runge, a San Angelo-area water planner; Ron Sommers, a Houston lawyer and Marfa landowner; Terry Bishop, a Presidio-area farmer and Presidio County groundwater district board member; Big Bend Ranch State Park Supt. Luis Armendariz; and James King, West Texas program manager for The Nature Conservancy. Mary Kelly of the environmental nonprofit Environmental Defense and Jennifer Montoya of World Wildlife Fund are also serving on the initial board to provide experience in science, water law and nonprofit development.

The trust currently is seeking an executive director. Davidson said the group is looking for someone who has administrative and water policy experience and a familiarity with the region, as well as the ability to communicate with landowners and raise funds.

The concept of a water trust to preserve and improve conditions on the Rio Grande in West Texas has been discussed for some time, but the Trans-Pecos Water Trust is the first organization of its

kind in the state. The Texas Water Development Board operates the Texas Water Trust, but that body does not have funds to acquire water rights.

Davidson said the water trust was “not just a tree-hugger deal,” but, by ensuring the flows upon which river outfitters and wildlife viewing depend, would contribute to economic development in the region.

“I believe it will have a positive effect on rural economies,” he said.

The deadline to apply for the executive director position is Feb. 1. Individuals interested in the position should contact Davidson at 432.371.2238 or by e-mail at mike@blueskybigbend.com.