

https://www.lasvegasoptic.com/news/community/students-work-with-hpwa-to-protect-sapello-watershed/article_d362716a-3d20-11ee-8ed1-dbc0e987d549.html

NEWS / COMMUNITY

Students work with HPWA to protect Sapello watershed

Vanessa Maciel

Published on Aug 17, 2023



The Hermit's Peak Watershed Alliance helps build trash racks such as this one aimed at slowing the flow of water, spreading it out and encouraging it to infiltrate.

“The goal is to prevent sediment and debris from getting through and reaching streams and rivers,” said HPWA Watershed Restoration Project Manager Nicholas Maurer.

Vanessa Maciel/Optic photo

Armed with saws, pickaxes, shovels, bucket hats, gloves and goggles, a youthful group of students and environmental workers gathered at the parking lot of New Mexico Highlands University's Ivan Hilton Science Technology Building the morning of Aug. 10.

After gathering at Highlands, the group traveled to a private property near Sapello affected by the Hermits Peak/Calf Canyon Fire. The group's mission was to help protect the watershed by combating upland and water drainage erosion, doing flood mitigation and aiding in reforestation efforts.

The group was working for the Hermit's Peak Watershed Alliance, a nonprofit based in Sapello that aims to restore and maintain the Gallinas, Sapello,

Tecolote, and lower Mora watersheds, said HPWA Executive Director Lea Knutson.

Much of the organization's work involves creating natural structures on the landscape to slow the flow of water, spread it out, and encourage it to infiltrate. The goal is to prevent sediment and debris from getting through and reaching streams and rivers, said HPWA Watershed Restoration Project Manager Nicholas Maurer.

“Keeping the sediment out of the rivers and streams helps to increase water quality and maintain proper water temperatures,” Maurer said. “Planting vegetation along river and stream banks helps to reduce erosion as well as maintain cooler temperatures due to shading and provide a nutrient input through material that falls in the river or stream that can act as a food source for organisms.”

Maurer said he and his crew have visited six different properties to do restoration work over the summer. He said they have traveled to these locations almost every day since kicking off the initiative in June. He noted that the HPWA has been doing restoration and recovery work in the area since before the devastating Hermits Peak/Calf Canyon Fire last year. However, Maurer said, the HPWA has recently increased its efforts.

“We’ve been doing restoration work,” Maurer said, “but it’s not ever been to this extent. ... This is the first year they’ve had full-on crews.”

The Youth Conservation Corps – a summer program for teenagers and young adults who are interested in working in the great outdoors – also formed part of the group helping to restore the Sapello watershed area on Aug. 10. Others at the Sapello property included NMHU students enrolled in a forestry field practices and safety course and HPWA officials.

HPWA received a grant from YCC NM to hire local young people to help restore fire damaged lands, said Steven Gonzales, crew leader for YCC.

“When we got the grant, we announced it,” Gonzales said, stating that flyers

were posted and information about the program was shared via social media.

The chosen YCC group then completed a two-week training before assisting the HPWA with their efforts, Gonzales said, noting that the YCC group's two main goals are to help with flood mitigation and erosion control. YCC crew members worked towards these goals on various private properties around Las Vegas, Las Dispensas, Sapello and Rociada.

Seven YCC workers ages 15-24 went to the Sapello watershed area as part of a summer recovery group working from May 22- Aug. 11. Older YCC participants will continue to work through October, while the younger workers ended their work on Aug. 11 to allow for school.

“We will continue to have a combined crew of our older YCC members who are not going back to school and our Gallinas crew working until the end of October on projects in both the Sapello and Gallinas watersheds,” Maurer said. “There is still a large amount of work to be done in terms of restoration and mitigation.”

As part of the conclusion of their summer work, the YCC group gave a presentation of what they learned during the summer at the Victoria D. de Sanchez Teacher Education Center on the NMHU campus.

With the aid of slides, the YCC group summarized their experience working to protect the watershed as well as the knowledge they gained from it. This included an overview of different types of handbuilt rock and log structures aimed at slowing down the flow of water.

HPWA Watershed Restoration Project Manager Renee Hernandez commended the YCC crew during their presentation.

“This summer they had a really grueling ... physical job,” Hernandez said. “They exceeded all of our expectations.”

“We’re really grateful we had such a great group.”

YCC crew members were interviewed to be part of the team, with Knutson conducting those interviews. After the presentation, Knutson said that, during interviews, when asked why they wanted to be part of YCC's work with the HPWA, every single interviewee said it was because they wanted to help their community. After the presentation, she said it was clear the group not only helped their community, but also gained knowledge in how to care for the land.

"You learned so much," Knutson told the YCC crew at the conclusion of their presentation. "I hope you all come back next year to do the same."