

FEATURE – USDA GRANT HELPS PROTECT SOUTHWEST FISH & FARMS

INTRO: Researchers in New Mexico are using a US Dept of Agriculture grant to protect endangered fish and farms in the Rio Grande valley. USDA's Pat O'Leary has more. (1:58)

THE DEMANDS FOR WATER FROM THE "BIG RIVER" IN THE SOUTHWESTERN UNITED STATES ARE INCREASING. AS URBAN AREAS AND AGRICULTURE EXPAND, RESEARCHERS FROM NEW MEXICO STATE UNIVERSITY ARE USING THE USDA-SPONSORED RIO GRANDE BASIN INITIATIVE TO RESPOND TO CHALLENGES.

David Cowley, New Mexico State University: My research and involvement with the Rio Grande Basin Initiative has been seeking ways that we could share agricultural water with the environment.

DAVID COWLEY'S INNOVATIVE PROJECT AIMS TO HELP FARMS AND FISH CO-EXIST IN THIS ARID ENVIRONMENT.

Cowley: The Rio Grande Silvery Minnow is an endangered species. During dry years, irrigation and urban diversions dry up this critical habitat and Silvery Minnows get stranded in isolated pools and if they get too hot in the afternoon they die. So the purpose of this project is to provide a wetted habitat that fish can seek out and go to as the river starts to decline and maybe give the government agencies time to come in and rescue minnows a little more effectively.

THE HABITAT IS CREATED BY RECYCLING NATURAL MATERIALS.

Cowley: We have installed dead cottonwood trees that we have tipped over and then buried the trunk in the riverbank here, so the root wad directs and deflects the water flow so that you get scour, we're attempting to scour out a trough, basically, or a deeper channel, that later in the summer when we begin to dry up the river channel we can bring water into this scoured trough and keep a wetted habitat for the Silvery Minnow and other native fishes.

TO BRING WATER TO THE TROUGHS, THE RESEARCHERS USE RETURN FLOWS – IRRIGATION CANALS THAT TAKE EXCESS WATER FROM FARMS BACK TO THE RIVER. THEY WILL TEST THIS SIMPLE SOLUTION BY MONITORING FISH POPULATIONS OVER THE NEXT FEW YEARS.

Cowley: And so this is an attempt to find a win-win solution where farmers can get their water and the return flows can be used to mitigate some of the damage to this endangered species.

IN BELEN, NEW MEXICO, I'M PAT O'LEARY FOR THE US DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE.