

Outstanding Waters Status Will Benefit Our Jemez Streams

Submission to the New Mexico Water Quality Control Commission hearing on proposal to designate certain New Mexico streams as Outstanding National Resource Waters

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As an angler and landowner in the Jemez watershed, the streams in the Jemez Mountains are special places for me. I first encountered them soon after moving to New Mexico in the early 1980s. With my young family, I spent many weekends hiking and camping along streams in the Santa Fe National Forest. We enjoyed their cool, clear water and the lush vegetation that frequently grew along their banks, all of which were an extreme contrast to the dry, high desert terrain of much of New Mexico. Later, I started carrying a pack rod on my hikes and, after discovering how limited were my flyfishing skills, I joined New Mexico Trout and started attending their meetings and workshops. As my skills developed, I began to explore less accessible waters that offered more solitude and the opportunity to cast my fly to less wary trout. Sometimes the desire to explore new waters was so strong that I just hiked the stream without ever rigging up my fly rod. I called that virtual flyfishing, as I spotted places in the stream that I thought held trout and imagined the fly and presentation I would use as I continued walking past.

To me, fly fishing is a solitary or almost solitary activity. It puts a premium on silence, stealth, and quiet observation and analysis of the water and its surroundings. The social part of fly fishing is in club activities such as meetings, workshops, and especially in volunteer conservation projects they sponsor. Those activities have kept me involved in New Mexico Trout for more than twenty-five years. New Mexico Trout is an all-volunteer, local, nonprofit organization whose mission is to promote the sport of fly fishing, to educate the public on the value of cold, clear streams and waterways, and to support restoration of those waters through donations and volunteer work. For example, we have donated money for supplies and provided volunteer labor for many of the barriers along USFS roads that prevent vehicles from driving down to sensitive riparian areas along the Rio Guadalupe and Rio Cebolla. We do an annual trash pickup along the Rio Guadalupe from the Gilman Tunnels to Porter's Landing. We have cleaned up and restored dispersed campsites in riparian areas all along the Rio Guadalupe and Rio Cebolla. We helped rebuild the eroding access trail to a part of the East Fork of the Jemez that is very heavily used by picnickers and waders. These are just a few examples of the many

ways we promote our mission to preserve and restore coldwater streams and their riparian areas in New Mexico.

Over the years I have become very familiar with most of the streams in the Jemez Mountains through hiking, fishing, and participating in volunteer restoration and monitoring projects. The Jemez streams being considered for Outstanding Waters status by New Mexico's Outdoor Recreation Division, together with the Rio Guadalupe, are particular favorites. I have hiked and fished the entire Rio San Antonio from its origin in the Valles Caldera National Preserve to where it passes under NM Highway 126. I have likewise hiked and fished the East Fork of the Rio Jemez from its origin in the Valle Grande all the way to where it joins the Rio San Antonio at Battleship Rock. Two equally deserving streams not being considered for ONRW status, the Rio Guadalupe and its Rio Cebolla tributary, are in my backyard. For many years, I have hiked, fished, and done restoration projects on them from their headwaters down to the southern SFNF boundary.

My wife and I own the property on the Rio Guadalupe that borders the SFNF, as well as another parcel on the Guadalupe about two miles downstream. Together they encompass over thirty acres and a half mile of the stream. Over the years we have been privately restoring our property to a more natural condition to improve its function as wildlife habitat. Our property is serving as a personal laboratory for implementing different restoration practices. This work has led me to an intimate knowledge of stream function and how to improve it to enhance water quality and aquatic habitat. Some successes on our property include creation of a 5 acre marsh and wet meadow, increasing stream bank willow density, building in-stream features to narrow and deepen the stream channel, creating habitat for brown trout, chubs, and suckers, replacing invasive trees and forbs with native species, and supporting a substantial increase in numbers and species of birds. Two years ago, a beaver family took up residence, adding their expertise as hydraulic engineers to our efforts. In summary, I know the importance of these streams as places of refuge, solace, and recreation and I care very deeply about them.

These Jemez streams are delightful places where visitors can go to refresh their minds and bodies. The waters are clear and cool, the surrounding vegetation is green, and the sounds of civilization are distant. Whether for a few hours, a weekend, or longer, visitors will go away feeling better and knowing that they want to come back. But all of New Mexico's coldwater streams are at risk. The climate in the Southwest is doing exactly what scientists have been predicting for more than thirty years. New Mexico is getting hotter, drier and with less winter snow that melts earlier. Stream flows are decreasing, and runoff levels get ever lower. Water temperatures are too high on parts of some streams to support trout and other coldwater species. People depend on these streams for recreation, for irrigation, for watering their livestock, and indirectly for drinking water. Because of our warming climate we increasingly have less and lower quality water.

Outstanding National Resource Waters status (ONRW), a state-level designation intended to preserve water quality, will provide an extra level of protection to these Jemez streams that are so important to us. New activities that degrade water quality will be prohibited, but already

existing activities in a watershed, such as grazing or acequia use, can continue as before. This point needs emphasis. Existing activities, as well as private property rights, will not be impacted by ONRW designation. In fact, existing uses will benefit from the continued delivery of clean water that these protections require. The state rules establishing the program explicitly state that ONRW status protects all existing uses and rights, such as those of acequias, grazing, wood collecting, bird watching, hiking, and gathering of traditional plants and herbs. Landowners, local residents, and people living in the Jemez corridor will be blessed with cleaner water and healthier waterways, not increased regulation.

Favorable publicity in the Jemez watershed prompted by ONRW status may bring additional resources to improve stream health and to address community concerns about water quality. People may say, “because this stream is so special, let’s do more to improve it!”

Finally, we need to recognize that the New Mexico Environment Department already manages water quality on all of the state’s surface waters. ONRW designation doesn’t bring increased bureaucratic oversight or undermine local interests, but it does mean managing for a higher water quality standard, something that is increasingly important in light of the previous national administration’s attempted rollback of protections for most of the Jemez watershed’s surface waters. As a longtime angler and a landowner in the Jemez watershed, I strongly support ONRW designation for Rio San Antonio and the East Fork of the Rio Jemez. These designations will benefit all of us who rely on these waters, be it for recreation, agriculture, or cultural practices, and it will help ensure clean water flows through our communities in the years ahead.