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## WET & WILD



Cable Hoover/Independent

**Above,** Bob Hasbrook and other volunteers transplant vegetation as they work to restore the depleted wetlands at Cebolla Canyon in El Malpais National Monument Saturday. **Below,** a cistern at Cebolla Spring marks the source of water for a section of recently restored wetlands at Cebolla Canyon in El Malpais National Monument Saturday.

## Volunteers work to restore Cebolla Canyon wetlands

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**C**EBOLLA CANYON — Viewing the long, broad expanse of Cebolla Canyon today, it's hard to imagine the arid, overgrazed land was once productive farmland. It may never be again, but a dedicated group of volunteers gathered Saturday and Sunday to do what they could to at least restore a former wetlands.

In the 13th year of restoring the natural wetlands, two dozen volunteers with the Albuquerque Wildlife Federation and Rio Puerco Alliance converged on the canyon in the El Malpais Conservation Area to cut and replant willows, uproot and replant bulrushes, and continue to assist nature in healing what man has rent asunder.

Carrots and cabbage were raised in the canyon during the 1930s, when water from

natural springs was first dammed and diverted into irrigation ditches by settlers from the Dust Bowl territory. Some 200 people once lived in the canyon, Albuquerque Wildlife Federation



Cable Hoover/Independent

Phil Carter, center, and other volunteers from Albuquerque and Santa Fe use shovels to brake up clumps of bulrushes so they can transplant the vegetation at Cebolla Canyon in El Malpais National Monument Saturday.

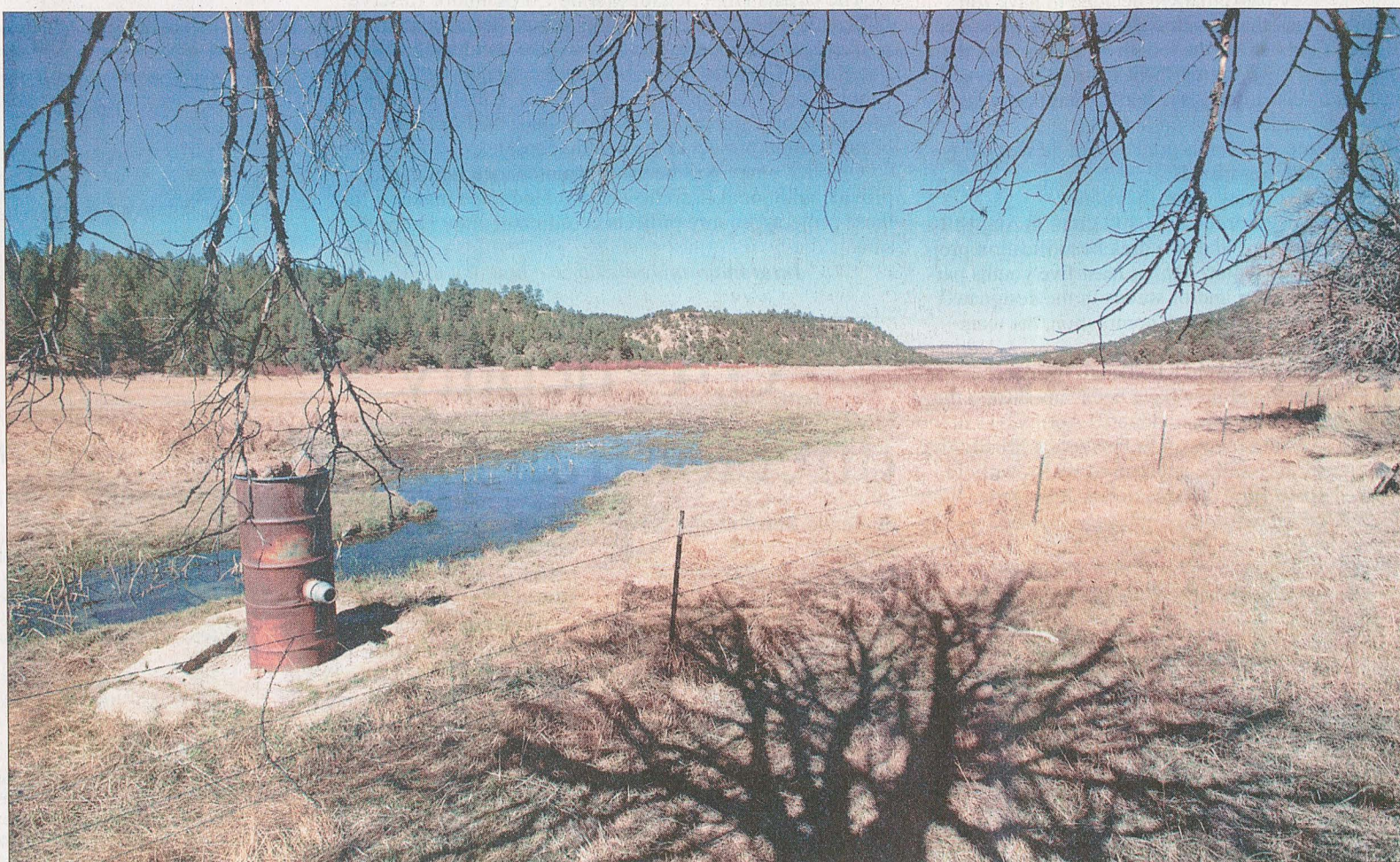
board member Michael Scialdone said.

Ruins of some dwellings still stand. World War II drew the men away from farming the land, and cattle grazing took over. Water from far up the canyon was again diverted to water the livestock. Thousands of acres of once fecund land gradually became desert. Years of drought conditions have played a role.

Former New Mexico Gov. Bruce King ranched about 7,000 acres in the area before selling out. There are now two ranches — the Cross Five and the York.

As they have every year, volunteers camped lower down the canyon, several miles east of New Mexico Highway 117, in an open area on the edge of a deep arroyo that was carved out by decades of monsoon water rushing through denuded grasslands. Their work sites were higher up the canyon, where one small group was to cut some wil-

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Project founder Bill Zeedyk stops to survey the progress of the 13-year project to restore the wetlands at Cebolla Canyon in El Malpais National Monument Saturday.

## Cebolla Canyon

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lows as shoots to be planted six miles farther along the deeply rutted road. Most of the work party had some muddy work ahead of them near a livestock pond.

As former U.S. Forest Service biologist Bill Zeedyk supervised the operation, teams divided into twos hauled bulrushes that were dredged out of the pond by Mark Reinecke of Sandia Park, operating a "mini excavator," across the road, over and under two barbed wire fences, to replant the wetland sedges in a dried-out area. The 1,200-foot-long sandpit, which Zeedyk named "Lake Cebolla," does occasionally hold water.

The replanting of vegetation, which began in 2010, is meant to retain the water longer and eventually expand the space into the wetland it once was. Sand, which has gradually filled in above the once-muddy soil, acts as a sponge, Zeedyk said, and allows water to percolate down about 10 feet to the natural water table.

Similar work has already been done, down the canyon at Cebolla Spring. Now a small pond, surrounded by green vegetation, the spring area

was "a mud pit" before restoration, Matt Schulz of the New Mexico Environment Department said.

"The saturation process is moving downstream," Schulz said, pausing by the spring. "We plugged a drainage ditch to foster the saturation. There's now 100 wetland acres, which is sizeable for New Mexico."

Zeedyk, 78, retired from the Forest Service several years ago and traveled the world with his wife, who is now deceased. Puttering around the house didn't work for him, so he returned to the work he loves most — assisting Mother Nature. He is in demand as a consultant throughout New Mexico, Colorado and Arizona on projects designed to undo damage humans have done to the earth.

He has been working on the Cebolla Canyon wetlands restoration since 2000, in cooperation with the U.S. Bureau of Land Management. Most of the 50,000 acres targeted for restoration are controlled by the BLM.

Following a master plan approved by the BLM, much has been accomplished since 2000, Zeedyk said. Berms have been formed, detention basins created, and small rock dams

have been built — using heavy equipment and funding from state and federal grants. The earth works are designed to restore a natural flow of water in the upper reaches of the canyon.

Reviving wetlands will attract more wildlife, such as birds and deer, Zeedyk said.

Asked how long it might take to restore the land, while walking through a dry expanse of rabbit brush and not much other vegetation, Zeedyk deadpanned: "Maybe a hundred years."

The Cebolla Canyon project is important to him. As he surveyed what has been done so far, he admitted that as more willows and bulrushes are planted, "The next couple years we'll see a big difference."

### The volunteers

Barb Diver, who drove over from Albuquerque Friday to set up camp, has been volunteering with the Albuquerque Wildlife Federation for the past four or five years, focusing on riparian repair. She became hooked on the work during a project in the Valle Caldera, near Los Alamos, and sees it as "healing" the land.

"You're doing some work that's

beneficial," she said.

Phil Carter, also from Albuquerque, had a simple explanation.

"It's fun," he said.

Carter described himself as a regular, part of a core group that shows up for such projects from March through October. The work and camaraderie of the camp are enjoyable, and there are always new people showing up.

One of the new people was Tammie Crowley, of Santa Fe, who was attracted by the nature of the work. Interviewed as the campers enjoyed a breakfast feast of burritos, prepared on two gas stoves by Scialdone, she also described the backcountry adventure as fun — at least the camping part.

Hours later, covered with mud from schleping bulrushes in a rock skid about 100 yards back and forth, Crowley was still having fun and said the work was "fulfilling."

Another group of volunteers, under the auspices of the Wild Turkey Federation, will arrive at the end of June to build more rock dams, Zeedyk said.

Clearly pleased with what has been accomplished since 2000, Zeedyk said, "We're making really extraordinary progress."