

CONSERVATION Showcase

With a Little Help from My Friends

Meet Frank Blackmer, from the Aztec area, who, being a progressive conservationist, is turning river bottom into wildlife habitat that will be frosting on the cake of his successful farm.

Blackmer selected his farm because of its promise of productivity. It lies to the north side of the San Juan river – and has a bench that drops down to the river bottom where a cottonwood riparian area exists. On top of the bench, away from the river, he raises alfalfa hay and haygrazer, which is a sorghum-like plant. This he rotates with small grains (oats) which he also sells for livestock feed. He rents pastureland for area cattlegrowers that are raising beef.

The conservation measures that he has incorporated into this operation include soil sampling so he knows what fertilizers he needs with his crops, a land planer so his fields are level and make the most efficient use of irrigation water, and riparian restoration to develop the river bottom for wildlife.

On his own, Blackmer has been removing salt cedar and Russian olive with a backhoe and utilized the hydro-mulcher the San Juan Soil & Water Conservation District has made available. The San Juan Soil & Water Conservation District rents the hydro-mulcher to remove salt cedar and Russian olive, and will cost-share part of the rent on the mulcher.

Blackmer's next step is to plant diverse native shrubs and trees in the areas being restored using chokecherry, sumac, gold currant, and corkscrew mesquite – varieties that provide wildlife with food



and shelter. Geese already inhabit the area, and turkeys are intermittent visitors. Blackmer is working with the New Mexico Game & Fish on the project, and entered into conversations with the Wild Turkey Federation about the plots development. The Bureau of Land Management has property adjacent to the site and is also interested in the effort.

NRCS is participating with Blackmer on the brush removal and plantings through its Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) which is part of the government's Farm Bill.

“There is lots of New Mexico olive in the area which makes good food and cover for wildlife,” said Allen Maez, NRCS Aztec district conservationist. “There is a really good stand on the site and it had a very good crop this fall.”

New Mexico is home to many who truly deserve the name “conservationist” – and Frank Blackmer is surely one of them.

For more information about WHIP and how it can apply to your land, go to www.nm.nrcs.usda.gov