

CONSERVATION Showcase

Carrizozo Area Strives to Save Stock Water, Wildlife

Water tanks, troughs, and ponds that New Mexico ranchers build and maintain for livestock, also become critical sources of water for a large array of wildlife. Taking some simple measures to create escape routes for birds, bats, squirrels, and other small animals that fall into these structures not only helps valuable wildlife survive, but prevents livestock water degradation caused by decaying animals.

Lois Cadwallader, Carrizozo soil conservationist, became interested in the ‘win-win’ that comes from ensuring the safety of wildlife on the ranches in her area, and engineered an outstanding workshop in Carrizozo, April 30, 2008 - with the assistance of Bat Conservation International, Upper Hondo and Carrizozo Soil and Water Conservation Districts, and South Central Mountain RC&D Council.

“Cattle will drink more if they have good quality water and, conversely, will drink less and eat less and consequently lose weight if the water is slimy and there are dead animals in it,” said Cadwallader. “We need to look at wildlife-friendly water troughs and tanks.”

Protecting water sources and ensuring the safety of wildlife requires some simple, but critical, steps according to Cadwallader. An initial step is to ensure the water trough or tank is kept as full as possible. If a small critter does fall into a water tank or trough, they typically need an escape structure to get out. Installing an escape ramp is the solution, but according to Cadwallader and Dan Taylor, of Bat Conservation International, not just any ramp or floating board will do.

The ramp, which is normally installed perpendicular to the side of the tank, needs to have sides that slope down into the water. Critters seeking an escape route will typically go around the edge (wall) of the water tank, and go right under a ramp that is open and has no sides sloping down into the water. The ramp needs to be of some non-slippery material – steel mesh works well. The ramp should not be installed at an angle greater than 45 degrees,



and needs to be flush to the side of the tank (so again the critter does not go right under the ramp). Floating boards do not work because they leave the animal stranded in the middle or still unable to reach the top of the tank if the water level is low. Also, birds seem to have trouble getting up on boards.

The workshop was chunk full of additional information about fencing and bracing obstructions, tank and trough size and placement, hands-on demonstrations of escape ramp construction, and other wildlife-friendly measures. The event offered attending ranchers free escape ramps, provided opportunities to visit with various agencies, and hosted an evening of bat viewing with night goggles. Representatives from the U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, and New Mexico Game and Fish attended. The BLM staff also brought materials and made ramps for their BLM drinkers, using the jig that was designed and constructed by Carrizozo NRCS district conservationist, Bob Moorhead.

It is always exciting to see such a quality initiative launched by an NRCS employee - and the great partnerships from the soil and water conservation districts, and resource and conservation development councils that help bring these ideas to fruition.