

Animas River Wetlands

A Legacy in the Making

Epiphanies have a way of changing lives, and so it has been for Patti and Ed Zink, presently returning 80 acres of what for decades had been hayfields, to the natural wetlands of the Animas River valley.

It was like a movie set," says Patti Zink of her visit to a small wetlands on an adjacent property. "There was the red-winged blackbird, and deer...the animals all came around. I saw it as a message. This should be our legacy, so that 20, 50 years from now, somebody will enjoy the wildlife on our wetlands."

And thus the journey began. The real opportunity emerged in 2006, when 100 acres directly across U.S. Highway 550 from the Zinks' Waterfall Ranch came up for sale. It was land that had been Zink property — cleared and leveled by Ed's father, John, to grow hay. In 1986, John Zink sold the property to another hay farmer, and part of the arrangement included a first right of refusal for the Zink family to buy the property back. In 2006, when the landowner sought to sell, Patti and Ed took the leap of faith and bought it.

Creating a wetlands is no simple task. For four years the Zinks worked with the Army Corps of Engineers and myriad other agencies to create the plan and gain approvals for the project. The Zinks placed 80 of the 100 acres into a conservation easement — meaning the land will remain undevel-

oped in perpetuity — plus laid the course to return 50 acres of that land to a shallow-water oxbow-wetland complex.

They set about structuring the Animas River Wetlands LLC as an off-site alternative for the mitigation of wetlands. In other words, development projects in the region that impact existing wetlands can purchase "credits" for acres in the Zinks' project.

"It wasn't until the Clean Water Act of 1974 that [conservationists] realized how important wetlands are for the environment," says Patti. "That's when they figured out the 'no net loss' of wetlands by doing off-site mitigation."

Falls Creek forges a natural path through the area as it travels to the Animas River. Water also feeds the budding wetlands from the Animas Consolidated Ditch that supports the Zinks' ranch.

"This is probably a uniquely correct place to do a wetlands," says Ed, noting that the water level in what appears as a long, skinny lake can be controlled. It's key for the growth of vegetation, and the reason the Zinks anticipate this project will succeed where many others have failed. Water levels must be exact for the plants to survive. ▶

by Indiana Reed