

Ecosystem Council gets \$100K grant
(The Valley Courier)



Funds will continue water quality project
By Ruth Heide

The San Luis Valley Ecosystem Council is going to “LEAP HIGH” when it comes to assisting San Luis Valley well owners with water quality problems.

Earlier this month the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) awarded a \$100,000 Environmental Justice grant to the Ecosystem Council for its Landscape Environmental Assessment Plan-Health Inspired Goals for Humans (LEAP HIGH) water quality project.

“We are really excited with the opportunity to be able to build water quality awareness through the San Luis Valley,” said SLV Ecosystem Council Director Christine Canaly, “and we are really glad that the EPA Environmental Justice Program has given us that opportunity.”

Canaly said much of the funding, which will be delivered over a three-year period through EPA’s Environmental Justice Collaborative Problem Solving Program, will be used for outreach. “We plan on bringing people together through working groups to come up with cost effective ways and ideas about how to start dealing with water quality issues,” she said. For example, the groups could consider cost effective filtration systems, she said.

The funding will also be used to connect together data the Ecosystem Council collected during a 2006 household well testing program. Last year the EPA Environmental Justice Program offered free well testing for Valley households. More than 400 households participated, and the majority of those households have already taken steps to treat their drinking water.

Canaly said the 2006 data will be plotted using GIS to determine where the water quality issues are most concentrated in the Valley.

In addition, the ecosystem will use the grant funding to work with public health nurses throughout the Valley to develop a protocol for linking water quality with health issues. The ecosystem council will encourage public health nurses to routinely ask patients about physical problems that may be caused from poor water quality, “to maybe zero in on that and help people find alternatives and a solution,” Canaly said.

She explained that during the 2006 well testing program, the ecosystem council discovered that one-fourth of the household wells that were tested through that program were positive for bacteria. People may have been experiencing intestinal problems, diarrhea and other health problems that they never realized were related to the water coming from their wells.

“We see this as seed money,” Canaly said. “It is an opportunity for us to get some seed money to be able to start looking at these issues in a much more comprehensive way.”

This project fits in with the ecosystem council’s mission of protecting and restoring, through education, research and advocacy, the Upper Rio Grande bioregion. The group’s vision encompasses health issues and environmental protection, and the two are inextricably linked, Canaly said.

She said the ecosystem council hopes to locate additional funding to expand the LEAP HIGH project. Future goals include free and reduced-price well testing and expansion of air-quality testing. Proposed legislation may also ultimately result from this project.

Granta Nakayama, assistant administrator for EPA’s Office of Enforcement and Compliance Assurance, said the EPA awarded \$100,000 grants to 10 community-based organizations including the SLV Ecosystem Council, the only Colorado organization to receive such funding. “These grants provide necessary resources for local communities to take an active role in our nation’s environmental solutions,” he said.