

San Luis Valley

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EDUCATION

New Adams State program to aid migrant students

The new program is funded by a \$2.1 million federal grant

BY MATT HILDNER
THE PUEBLO CHIEFTAIN

ALAMOSA — Adams State University has launched a program that school officials hope will make it easier for agricultural workers to get into the school and stay there. The \$2.1 million College Assistance Migrant Program, which is funded by a grant from the U.S. Department of Education, will pay for outreach efforts to potential students and for financial aid and support services once they're enrolled. Program Director Pete

Gomez said it can be difficult to recruit such students because of language barriers and hard to get them to enroll because of financial reasons. "This program will provide that for us," he said. Gomez and Miguel Chaparro, a retention specialist for the program, have been scouring the state looking for potential students since the program launched July 1. The program aims to enroll 30 first-year students per year over the five-year life of the grant. Students who make it into the program are provided with scholarships and stipends to assist with tuition, fees, room and board and have access to continued financial advising. Students must be a U.S. citizen or a permanent resident and have completed high school or a general equivalency degree program. And they also must meet Adams State's admission requirements and enroll in a minimum of 12 credit hours per semester. Gomez, who was out of town and spoke to The Chieftain by phone, did not have immediate estimates

on how many students in the state might be eligible for the program. But he recounted a recent conversation with a student from Grand Junction who was sure she wouldn't have the money for college but is enrolled in the program. "I know there are a lot of other students out there like that," he said. To be eligible for the program, students must also have met one of three general eligibility requirements. They must have participated in or have been eligible to participate in a school Migrant Education Program. Or, they or an immediate family member was a migrant farm worker whose travel prevented him/her from returning home the same day or a seasonal farm worker who worked for at least 75 days doing agricultural work within the last two years. Third, they participated in or were eligible to participate in the National Farmworker Jobs Program. Gomez emphasized that anyone interested in the program should contact him before they decide they don't meet the program's requirements. He can be reached at 719-587-



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CHIEFTAIN PHOTO/MATT HILDNER

A New Mexico environmental group is arguing that Colorado should release more Rio Grande water downstream.

NATURAL RESOURCES

Colorado official: Rio Grande use appropriate

But N.M. group says Colorado is threatening an endangered fish

BY MATT HILDNER
THE PUEBLO CHIEFTAIN

ALAMOSA — For more than four decades, Colorado has followed the letter of the law that dictates how flows on the Rio Grande are divvied up with downstream neighbors New Mexico and Texas. But a New Mexico environmental group concerned with the survival of an endangered fish says that is not enough. WildEarth Guardians told Colorado officials in January it intended

to sue the state over its management of the Rio Grande, claiming that the miserly flows that cross the state line in May and June of dry years were not enough to preserve the Rio Grande silvery minnow. Last week, the group wrote to the U.S. Department of the Interior, which has the responsibility of preserving the fish and also plays a large role in managing the river in New Mexico, asking that it exert more influence over Colorado. "We just see the federal government playing some role in making the conversation more broad," said Jen Pelz, an attorney for the guardians who specializes in water issues. Pelz said she has not gotten a formal response from the state regarding the January notice. But David Robbins, an attorney for the Alamosa-based Rio Grande Water Conservation District, was clear in his review of the letter to the Interior with the district's board. "It's wrong and it deserves to be resisted

strenuously," he said. Water users in the valley have lived up to the compact's obligations and aren't required to go beyond it, he said. "We don't have to let the water go downstream," Robbins said. "We're entitled to use it in our state and we always want to remember that." Colorado has complied with the 1939 Rio Grande Compact for more than four decades after settling a lawsuit brought by New Mexico and Texas. Following the 1968 settlement, Colorado's state engineer initiated the practice of curtailing surface water rights — even those that predate the compact — to ensure that enough water made it downstream to satisfy compact requirements. The delivery requirements vary from year to year, depending on the size of Colorado's water supply. When the Rio Grande has a wet year, more water must be sent downstream. In dry years, water users in the San Luis Valley

keep a bigger share. But there are no requirements that dictate what time of year the water has to be delivered. When the irrigation season begins April 1 in the valley, irrigators divert water for nearly 600,000 acres of potatoes, barley, alfalfa and pasture. Moreover, what the plants don't soak up in late spring and early summer, often percolates down to the unconfined aquifer, which many water users then tap to

SEE FISH, 9A



CHIEFTAIN PHOTO/MATT HILDNER

While planning for the Rio Grande Healthy Living Park gets underway, parts of the property shown here will continue to be irrigated.

LAND USE

Group still believes in ag-themed park

But a lot of fundraising will have to take place

BY MATT HILDNER
THE PUEBLO CHIEFTAIN

ALAMOSA — With a legal battle in their rear-view mirror, supporters of an agricultural-themed park along the Rio Grande are now focused on fundraising and kick-starting a community-planning process for the land. San Francisco-based Trust for Public Land has purchased the 38-acre parcel with the help of a \$700,000 loan and

\$375,000 in local fundraising. And the San Luis Valley Local Foods Coalition that was central to the push to create the Rio Grande Healthy Living Park intends to buy the property from the trust. "We have every intention to purchase that land for the community," said Liza Marron, director of the San Luis Valley Local Foods Coalition. "First and foremost is to pay off the bridge loan." That means more fun-

draising for supporters, who initially had offered the Alamosa School District RE-11J \$750,000 for the property of the former Polston Elementary School. Instead, the school board chose to sell the land for \$250,000 to Alamosa County Surveyor Dan Russell, who planned to develop an RV park at the site. The settlement of a subsequent lawsuit earlier this month led to

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COURTESY PHOTO/CHASE FOUNTAIN/TEXAS PARKS AND WILDLIFE

The endangered Rio Grande silvery minnow reproduces along the river in New Mexico at the same time San Luis Valley farmers irrigate their crops in May and June.

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finish their crops after the stream flows have dwindled.

But for Pelz, the compact, with its emphasis on the role of the states, is not enough to solve the river's problems.

"No one really looks at it as a whole river," she said.

The timing of Colorado's diversions are a problem, WildEarth Guardians argued, because in dry years the compact allows Colorado water users to take nearly all of the river's flows.

The group's letter to interior officials noted that on May 18 of last year, the Rio Grande reached its peak flow and Colorado was diverting 98 percent of the river before it crossed the state line.

That leaves an insufficient amount of water left over when the minnow enters breeding season in May and reduces the chances of the fish's survival, the group said.

And the dry years in which this scenario occurs are likely to become the norm as climate change

advances, the group said in the letter.

Pelz estimated that shutting down irrigators for three days would produce the flows needed to clean out sediment and produce the habitat needed for the minnow.

"It doesn't take shutting down the San Luis Valley for two weeks," she said.

But Robbins pointed to a host of problems in New Mexico that could be solved before asking Colorado to send additional water downstream.

For example, New Mexico has five dams that hinder the minnow and Colorado has nothing to do with their operations.

Moreover, Robbins said that as early as 1916, the minnow was effectively healthy despite the fact that Colorado already had reached its peak use along the Rio Grande.

And the conservation district has undertaken its own plan to preserve habitat for the southwestern willow flycatcher, a federally endangered species that also is



COURTESY PHOTO/U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

The Southwestern Willow Flycatcher is another endangered species that WildEarth Guardians believes would benefit from a change in how the Rio Grande is managed.

of concern to WildEarth Guardians.

The demands from the south for more water out of the valley also come just as valley rancher Gary Boyce has developed a new proposal to export water to the Front Range.

The timing of the two developments was not lost on Robbins.

"If everybody in the room and all of your neighbors are starting to feel a little bit pulled asunder or under threat of being drawn and quartered, you're probably awake and your senses are working," he said.

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CHIEFTAIN PHOTO/MATT HILDNER

Weed control will continue to be an issue on the property.

park supporters buying the site from Russell for \$900,000.

But the need to fund raise will not stand in the way of other steps in the development of a park.

"The lenders loaned the amount they did to allow the local foods coalition to hire a director and maintain the land," Marron said.

The local foods coalition is forming a task force that will conduct a search for a park director who will be in place by Dec. 1.

And the group also will undertake a new planning process for what the site will include, although the over-riding theme will retain an emphasis on agriculture.

Although a multiyear plan had been established and posted on the website for the park, the group wanted to under-

take a new one following the lawsuit.

"It's kind of a new ballgame now," she said.

The coalition hopes to schedule meetings in August and September to gather public input.

In the meantime, members of the coalition and supporters of the park will continue to work on the site.

The property, which includes a water right, has pasture and a garden on the north end that are still being irrigated.

But the remainder of the property will give the group its biggest maintenance task.

"Controlling weeds is No. 1," she said.

The public will be welcome to tour the site at 10 a.m. Aug. 1, Marron said.

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