

# Residents, officials forge vision for new urban wildlife refuge in N.M.

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ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. -- The Valle de Oro National Wildlife Refuge currently is home to little wildlife.

The new addition to the national refuge system, established last year on the site of an old dairy farm on the southern edge of New Mexico's largest city, is an agricultural quilt of hay, alfalfa and grass. The only signs of nonhuman life during a National Public Lands Day event on the refuge grounds over the weekend were a few orange sulphur butterflies.

But community members would like to be able to watch migrating birds, native southwestern flycatchers, deer, fox and other animals in the refuge within a few years, the residents told U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service officials during a "visioning session" at the event.

About 100 people, including nearby residents, Girl Scouts, retirees and families, gathered in small groups under white tents to hash out a vision for the new refuge, the first urban national wildlife refuge in the Southwest.

"This is a rare opportunity to build a refuge from the ground up," said refuge manager Jennifer Owen-White, the sole employee of the site, which lies about 5 miles south of downtown Albuquerque amid auto salvage yards, small farms and houses.

Suggestions ranged from creating a wetland to building a loop road to make sure handicapped visitors have access to the site. Other ideas included bringing back native plant and animal species, reconnecting the lands to the Rio Grande -- now separated from the refuge by a levee -- and setting aside a campfire area for Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts.

A few ideas conflicted with one another. Some people favored vehicle access, while others said they want the 570-acre refuge to be car-free. But overall, most people had similar visions for the property. Everyone agreed that creating educational opportunities for schoolchildren and the public should be a high priority, as well as restoring the bosque, the cottonwood-willow forest along the river, and maintaining part of the refuge as farmland or a garden.

Much of what residents suggested aligned with Owen-White's own ideas.

"It was so great to see that almost everyone wants the same things," she said.

Unlike most other wildlife refuges, Valle de Oro, which means "golden valley" in Spanish, lies adjacent to a residential neighborhood, which presents some unusual challenges. At Saturday's event, one neighbor told Owen-White he is concerned a new trail could be routed beside his house.

"Nothing has been decided yet," Owen-White said.

And although many people would like to see the lands reconnected with the river, which once flowed through the area before shifting course several decades ago, doing so would require careful planning to avoid flooding homes. Owen-White said that despite the levee, the farmland that makes up the refuge occasionally floods, and the refuge could be designed in a way that could better manage those overflows.

Jen Pelz, wild rivers program director for Santa Fe-based WildEarth Guardians, said she hopes the agency's unusually community-focused public process for designing the site will help people understand the importance of river restoration.

"I think the thing that's forgotten in these areas next to the river is, if the river doesn't have water in it and the bosque isn't healthy, then the heart of the resource is gone," she said. "I think people need to realize that the river health is really important to the success of this refuge."

Community support was key in establishing the refuge. Part of the \$18.6 million in funding needed to purchase the lands came from Bernalillo County and other local and state entities, including the Albuquerque Metropolitan Arroyo Flood Control Authority and the state Legislature. Other partners include the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, the Trust for Public Land and the Friends of Valle de Oro National Wildlife Refuge.

The Bureau of Reclamation also bought 250 acre-feet of water rights to the Rio Grande for the refuge, which will help maintain habitat for the endangered Rio Grande silvery minnow, the Southwestern willow flycatcher, and other riparian and aquatic species.

The Trust for Public Land is looking to secure the last of the funding needed to complete the purchase through the Land and Water Conservation Fund, which uses royalties from offshore oil and gas drilling for public lands purchases.

And despite the current budget crunch, Owen-White remained hopeful. "There's just so much support for this, and we have such great partners, that I know this can be achieved," she said.