Five groups unite for river clean-up project

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Work began last week at an urgent pace on the river cleaning project on the main stem of the Walker River through Mason Valley.

The project is being done with the Mason Valley Conservation District in the lead role but with help from the Walker River Irrigation District, Lyon County and the city of Yerington, both in cash and in-kind labor and equipment contributions. The main work is being done by Jim Chico’s Desert Engineering.

Retiring Walker River watermaster Jim Shaw later in the meeting commented on how this would “take the cooperation of everybody,” and he added he “appreciated NFWF (National Fish and Wildlife Foundation) and the city and county stepping up. We all live here,” he added.

That cooperation was evident from discussion at the meeting and afterwards as work was coordinated.

The project was to go as far upstream as possible but starting at the Weir with the goal of getting to the Bridge Street bridge. Work had begun under a MVCD rolling stock permit, used for maintenance projects, etc., since there was no water and thus no river, basically, on initial clearing or leveling sandbars.

DVCD manager Ed Ryan said a permit application had gone in the day before, but he hoped ultimately one wasn’t needed.

The situation is that sediment in the riverbed significantly has reduced the amount of water that the river channel might hold, thus raising the flood potential. So with the dry riverbed this late summer and fall, locals began efforts to take advantage and clean the river. The city and county held emergency meetings just more than a month ago to declare an emergency and send resolutions to the state via the governor and emergency management division asking for their help and a state declaration.

The governor requested the state, including the Division of Environmental Protection, and federal agencies, mainly the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, to expedite permits and what was necessary for the project.

City and county crews and equipment joined the effort Thursday, joining crews from Desert Engineering, which had begun work earlier in the week under the direction of the conservation district.
The urgency to clean the river has been to do so while the river was dry at least in central and northern Mason Valley, which would mean crews could get equipment into the riverbed without as many issues.

The Walker River Irrigation District board of directors met in a special session last Thursday where it approved funding of $185,000, to be taken from the prior National Fish and Wildlife Foundation grant of several years ago for its leasing program. Local rancher Tony Reviglio, though, had advocated to take more money from that grant to be able to have enough funding for this project.

“Time is limited,” he said of the project’s urgency with water to come down the river soon.

“Quit nickel-and-diming and get it done,” rancher Tom Reviglio said.

Although it would be subject to approval of its board and council, Lyon County manager Jeff Page at the meeting pledged in-kind labor and equipment and noted he was recommending a cash contribution of $25,000. This item will be on Thursday’s board of commissioners meeting agenda for formal approval.

Although the cash contribution also would be subject to approval of the city council, Yerington city manager Dan Newell pledged in-kind contributions, also, along with a contribution of unspent grant money for its dredging project, about $150,000 to $160,000.

After the meeting, several officials present, including Page, Newell, Commissioner Greg Hunewill, Jim and Greg Chico, WRID manager Bert Bryan and Ryan, looked at an aerial photo of the river as they looked at where work would be occurring.

Near the end of the meeting, Page said he didn’t want people to misunderstand that this river cleaning would guarantee there wouldn’t be flooding. He said if enough water came down the river it could still flood even with this river cleaning project, but it would be a flood reduction effort.

Page last Thursday said county and city crews and equipment began work that day. He said the city had an operator with a backhoe working at the Goldfield bridge while the county had two backhoes and a loader with operators working at the Mason bridge. They were doing work suggested by Ryan that would increase the flows under the bridge.

In talks with contractor Chico, it was mentioned the city could help with work under the bridges so that is where they started.

Page indicated crews would be working through the weekend on the project due to the urgency to try to beat the arrival of river flows in this lower stretch of the river (Bridge to Weir). Chico said there were already some wet spots.

Previously, Yerington city officials had said it could contribute $10,000 before talks began with National Fish and Wildlife Foundation officials about using the unspent portion of the dredging
program grant on this project. Joy Morris, program director for the Walker Basin Restoration Program for NFWF, was on the phone at the meeting and she confirmed that arrangement.

Morris said this grant was given to the city four or five years ago but so far they have been unable to do any dredging once things were finalized there due to the low river flows, as higher flows were needed to effectively operate the dredge.

Previously, Newell said most of the costs for the project were initial or upfront costs, so they had expended most of what they would expend.

He said if they don’t expend the remaining money from the dredging project grant then they have to return those excess funds.

Bert Bryan, WRID general manager, said he had been talking with Morris also about using some of the leasing program grant funding for this project and get verbal approval. WRID previously used some of the leasing program grant funds through a grant agreement amendment for a cleanout project near the Yerington Weir.

Gordon DePaoli, WRID legal counsel, said the current grant agreement has a Dec. 15, 2017, end term date on it, unless it is extended. He said if not expended by then the unused grant funds go away, but he also said it is possible to extend the grant term.

Morris said the WRID grant specifically mentions leasing but said a way this project qualifies is if it helps future functionality of the river, which this project should do. She said she could give verbal approval to speed it up pending the written amendment, which should only take a few days.

Regarding the city dredging project, in 2010 the city received a $1.2 million grant from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation for a “sediment removal and long-term management in Yerington” project that consisted of putting a dredge into the river just upstream of the Yerington Weir, with the goal, according to the grant agreement, to dredge out 48,000 tons of excess sediment from the Walker River outside Yerington to improve flow of the Walker River. The sediment would go into two settling ponds.

Watermaster Jim Shaw, who was retiring at the end of last week, told the assembled, which included a number of farmers/ranchers, that the recent rains had brought some water farther up the river, although it hadn’t reached the Bridge Street bridge yet. However, he said that would complicate things and more rains would only increase the chance of river flows returning in river in the central valley.

Local rancher Joe Sceirine asked where the sediment removed would go. Ryan said he was waiting for a GPS, since a person from his office was out of area earlier in the week, that would specifically identify where they would go in and out of the river with equipment and where they would drop the spoils, but locations had been identified.
Sceirine said after the 1997 flood, some sediment material was used to rebuild and reinforce the levees along the river bank.

Ryan said this could occur as long as the sediment couldn’t wash back into the river as that would require another permit from the Army Corps of Engineers that could delay the project. He said the first map showed the stretch from the Weir to Goldfield bridge. Several at the meeting, including Shaw, said the work should start downriver.

Shaw said there was a question about cleaning out the river at the Mason Valley Wildlife Management Area, but that wasn’t part of the plans. That would be up to the Nevada Department of Wildlife.

There was a proposal to remove sediment over the seven miles upstream to the confluence of the east and west forks of the Walker, but that would likely depend on funding remaining and the water in the river.

Shaw said WRID was trying to divert water into ditches and such to decrease water coming further down the river.

The meeting featured further discussion of the equipment and manpower Chico might have available, with suggestions that as much as possible could be used, and there were comments about private contributions. Chico said he estimated doing about three-quarters of a mile per day.

“I’m just glad we’re doing it,” Page said in a separate interview later Thursday.