Youth conservation crew enjoys first year at work

Mason Valley News
August 4, 2015
By: Keith Trout

In a new program this year it hopes to continue each summer, the Walker Basin Conservancy hired its first Walker Basin Youth Conservation Crew, patterned after a national youth conservation corps program, to do improvement projects in the basin this summer.

The WBC established this youth work crew earlier this year, one it said was the first of its kind to do conservation projects in the Walker River Basin.

The crew, led by Dan Pedersen, a local teacher, consists of six youths ages 16 to 18, with one girl joining five boys. The crew consists of Kyle Banta, Vince Bolton, Myles Mour, Brianna Soukup, Shawn Spurlock and Paul Swirsky.

The program began June 15 and runs for eight weeks, ending early this month.

Steve Tomac, conservation and stewardship director with the Walker Basin Conservancy, said they hope to continue this program next year and in future years. The crew’s work mainly was associated with conservation projects on properties under the WBC’s management. The program began in June and concludes this early this month.

The Walker Basin Conservancy was formed last year by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation as part of the Walker Basin Restoration Program to provide stewardship activities on properties acquired by NFWF through this program.

The goal of the WBRP is to acquire water, through acquisition of water rights from willing sellers, to flow to Walker Lake as an effort to preserve that lake by increasing its dwindling water levels.

The work done by the youth work crew this summer includes restoration of retired farmland, mainly consisting of weeding around new plantings; protection of trees and other plants along the river, such as through trees wrapped with wire to protect them from beavers; litter collection along the Walker River; litter collection at Walker Lake; and trail construction and maintenance along the east and west forks of the Walker River.

Pedersen said they have done revegetation and reseeding of native plants to reestablish natural flora on properties obtained by NFWF where water rights have been removed, such as properties along the East Walker River area.
He also said trails were cut at the Rafter 7 Ranch, which is being opened to the public after being acquired by NFWF, to open trails through the brush to the river for picnicking and fishing, and maintenance work on the Wilson Canyon Trail.

In addition, Tomac said that educational sessions are captured each day. Pedersen has a wide and varied background in teaching and in the private sector, such as working as mineral patent examiner and trained geologist.

“We feel extremely fortunate Dan was able to take the position. The kids have benefited. He teaches them all kinds of stuff,” Tomac said, adding one part he likes is that each day Pedersen comes into the office and says it was “the best day ever.”

“We are very pleased with the program; it has been well worth the effort to implement,” Tomac said. “It’s provided a good employment opportunity for kids in our community, as well as helped us out with much needed assistance with our summer work load. We’re amazed at how hard they work and how much they are able to accomplish.”

A handout on the program says, “Working on the (conservation crew) fosters a spirit of cooperation and teamwork, teaches youth the importance of the environment, themselves and service to the community. It gives them a chance to see how they can play a role in being good stewards of the environment.”

The full-time job began at 6 a.m. and finished about 2:30 p.m. weekdays. Pedersen said the youths chose the early start time.

Tomac said WBC already has its own revegetation crew and land managers, but the youth crew was able to build on that and do bigger projects on property.

“The youth program was a perfect way to add capacity,” he said.

He said they worked with the Walker Lake Crusaders to pick up trash along the lake one day late last month.

Mour said that day was his favorite in the program, “seeing everyone be so appreciative of the work we were doing over there.”

Pedersen said the youths helped improve access to the Wilson Canyon Trail, making it more user-friendly, such as for older or handicapped walkers.

Kyle Banta said of his favorite part of the job, “All the fun memories and making the new hiking trails at Rafter 7 Ranch.”

Swirsky said of a highlight of the job, “Going on the properties that I wouldn’t normally have access to.”
Tomac said he and WBC staff came up with the idea early this year, so they were tight on time but worked with the Yerington and Smith Valley high schools to advertise the positions.

He said they hope to start earlier next year and hopefully try to get someone from Smith Valley also.