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Truckee River flood control to resume in spring

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Gurgling water sparkles in winter sunlight at two locations where experts are trying to make the lower Truckee River work as it should.

Major earth-moving is mostly complete at the 102 Ranch and the site of a former trailer park at Lockwood, where multimillion-dollar river restoration projects are under way.

The sites now are being buttoned up for the winter. Come spring, work will resume as crews strive to establish wetlands and flourishing native vegetation.

It's all part of an effort to return the lower Truckee to more of what it used to be, before well-intentioned but harmful changes.

"The river's never going to be exactly what it was, but it can be a functioning system again. That's what we've lost here," said Mickey Hazelwood, Truckee River project director for the Nature Conservancy, which is heading up the restoration efforts.

Both projects are components of a major Truckee River flood control project, expected to cost between

\$1.2 billion and \$1.6 billion.

Early work is concentrating on restoring the lower Truckee, so it can handle any increased flows of floodwaters caused by flood control improvements planned upstream in Reno-Sparks.

"There's no way we in the Truckee Meadows can take our problems and shove them downstream," Reno Councilman Dave Aiazzi said during a ground-breaking ceremony at the 102 Ranch last September.

But in addition to helping control flooding, the projects are designed to improve water quality and habitat for fish, wildlife and river vegetation.

Much of that was harmed back in the 1960s, when the federal government carved the Truckee River into a straight channel in what at the time was considered the best way to ease flood danger upstream.

As a result, the river's ecosystem was turned on its head. Now, a lot of money is being spent to change things back.

Earth-moving work conducted since late summer involved cutting natural, meandering turns into the river channel, two at the

102 Ranch and one at Lockwood. The turns will allow floodwaters to slow and spread naturally over

the floodplain, nourishing the landscape while doing so.

Changes also were made at a place at the 102 Ranch where floodwaters in 1997 punched into the site of an old gravel pit, essentially turning the river in that location into a pond.

"That was just a huge lake. Now, you can see the water moving again," Hazelwood said.

Improvements are modeled after a similar project at the historic McCarran Ranch that the Nature Conservancy completed several years ago. There, natural conditions have been successfully restored, with plants and wildlife flourishing.

"They figured out a lot of the potential pitfalls there," said Danielle Henderson, natural resource manager for the flood project.

That knowledge paved the way for the work now under way at the 102 Ranch and Lockwood, as well as nine other sites along the river where future projects are planned, Henderson said.

The \$8 million restoration of the river at the former site of the Mustang Ranch bordello is expected to commence later this year.

Additional Facts

River improvements

- \$6 million in work planned at 102 Ranch, about 14 miles east of Sparks
- \$5.8 million in work planned at Lockwood, about 3 miles east of Sparks
- Construction of natural, meandering turns in the river channel
- Wetlands will be established.
- Invasive weeds will be removed and native cottonwoods, willows and other vegetation re-established.
- At Lockwood, Washoe County will soon begin construction of a regional park.

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Log on to view a photo gallery of the Truckee River projects by photographer Marilyn Newton.
