

Mustang Ranch site next on Truckee restoration project

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The place where Joe Conforte opened Nevada's first legal brothel in 1971 soon will be the focus of the next effort to restore a troubled Truckee River.

Work on the \$7.8 million restoration of the Mustang Ranch is expected to begin in late July, with experts describing the project as an important milestone in ongoing efforts to improve the lower portion of the river that winds 116 miles from Lake Tahoe to Pyramid Lake.

"We're trying to link all this together as much as possible," said Mickey Hazelwood, Truckee River project director for the Nature Conservancy, which is heading up the restoration.

"We're fully aware that more is better, and we haven't done enough yet," Hazelwood said.

The Mustang Ranch is just upstream from the historic McCarran Ranch, where the conservancy completed another major restoration project in 2006.

Once the Mustang project is finished, more than six contiguous miles of the lower Truckee will have been restored to a state more friendly to the environment, fish and wildlife.

Two other river restoration projects on the lower Truckee also are under way:

- The \$6 million restoration of the 102 Ranch downstream of the McCarran Ranch and about 14 miles east of Sparks.

- The \$5.8 million restoration of the site of a former trailer park in Lockwood, about 3 miles east of Sparks.

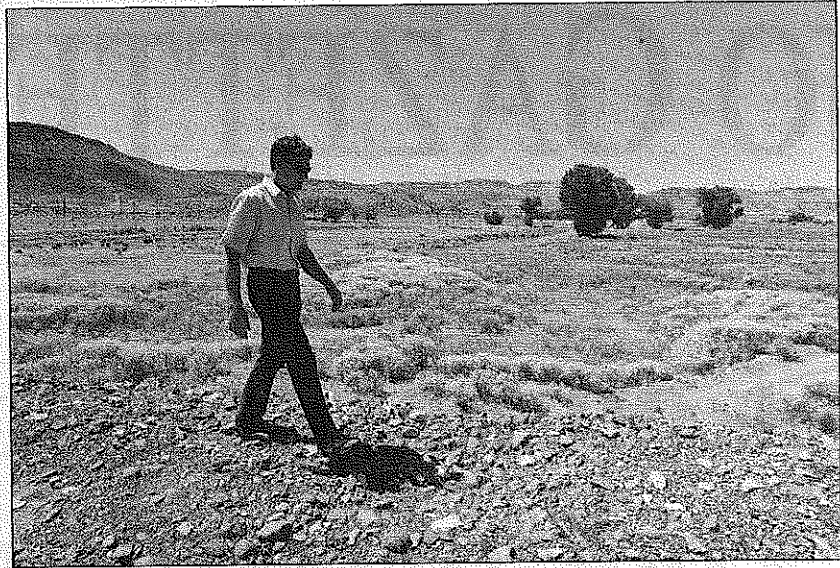
As much as 20 miles of the lower Truckee ultimately could be restored, with much of the work, including the Mustang Ranch, associated with the \$1.5 billion Truckee River flood project.

"We're now asking ourselves how much is actually enough," Hazelwood said.

Lower river restoration must occur before major flood control improvements, such as riverbank terraces and flood walls, are built in the Reno-Sparks area to ensure those changes don't cause flooding problems downstream, said Danielle Henderson, natural resource manager for the flood project.

"We don't want to have a negative impact in downstream areas," Henderson said. "This puts us in a good position to get going on the Truckee Meadows and downtown Reno projects."

The work also undoes damage caused decades ago when the river channel was straightened in what experts thought at the time would be the best approach to flood control. At the Mustang Ranch,



PHOTOS BY DAVID B. PARKER/RGJ

Mickey Hazelwood of the Nature Conservancy walks on Thursday at Mustang Ranch.

MUSTANG RANCH RESTORATION

- \$7.8 million project to begin in late July.
- Major earth moving to be done by December.
- Re-vegetation of area to take three to four years.
- About 250,000 cubic yards of soil to be moved.
- 60,000 tons of rock to be used.
- Natural meanders of river channel to be restored, fish and wildlife habitat enhanced.
- Underground jet fuel pipeline to be relocated.

the river's course might have been altered for agricultural purposes or other reasons.

Straightening the river into what Hazelwood describes as a "big, flat conveyance ditch" resulted in a host of ecological problems, including destruction of habitat needed for trees and river vegetation, as well as fish and wildlife.

Restoration will involve cutting new turns into the river's course near where Conforte's brothel once stood. That will allow floodwaters to spread out naturally, reconnecting the river to its floodplain and nourishing the landscape in the process.

Rock riffles and pools will be installed to improve fish habitat, and wetlands will be established. What is now a "sea" of invading tall whitetop weeds, already sprayed with chemicals and dying, will be replaced with native vegetation.



Wild horses graze at Mustang Ranch.

"We're just trying to kick-start the natural process," Hazelwood said.

The Mustang project also will involve relocating a buried jet fuel pipeline that crosses beneath the river there in two locations. The Kinder-Morgan Energy Partners pipeline, which stretches about 63 miles from the Sparks fuel farm to Fallon Naval Air Station, will be moved to a location north of the river's new course.

The likely future of Mustang Ranch can be viewed today at the McCarran Ranch, a property now thriving with plants, birds, fish and other wildlife.