



Onlookers watch as a bulldozer removes a dirt barrier allowing the San Miguel River to return to its original path as part of the Valley Floor River Restoration Project on Sunday. (Photo by Jessica Kutz)

VALLEY FLOOR

History made right, as river is restored

San Miguel returned to original alignment on Sunday

By **JESSICA KUTZ**
Staff Reporter

It is believed that the San Miguel River was channelized (straightened) to make it easier to transport out tailings from mining operations in the early 1900s. Environmental advocates have long regarded that decision as a disastrous turning point for the once thriving riparian and wetland habitat.

Thanks to the Valley Floor River Restoration Project, the San Miguel River on the west side of Telluride finally was reunited on

Sunday with its natural meandering ways.

The plan for the “new” river route was based on aerial photography taken before the channelization had taken place. This helped project officials in finding the general area where the river had once been. They then were able to accurately locate the original alignment by studying the prominence of gravel layers in the area.

In the words of Gary Hickcox, former chair of the Open Space Commission and former director of the San Miguel Conservation

Fund, “The river will be able to do what rivers do.” It will be able to flood when necessary, foster riparian habitat and overall “be a much healthier river system,” he said.

Once confined to the southern side of the Valley Floor, the river will now run lazily through the space and work its magic on land that had been devoid of the water source for more than 100 years. To recreate the meandering nature of the river, an additional 1,300 feet of length was introduced.

It is hoped that ecologically, the

River is restored

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area eventually will return to something close to its original state. As David Blauch, project designer with Ecological Resource Consultants, put it, "Five years from now, we are hoping that nobody knows this is a new channel."

According to Hilary Cooper, program manager for Valley Floor Preservation Partners, "They set up the project to have minimal human engineering and to have the river do the engineering."

Although there will be some human-led interventions, including planting a seed mix based on studies of plants native to the area as well as continuous monitoring,

it is believed that the river — and as some said, the beavers — will take care of the rest.

If the river is able to flood naturally again, it will be able to "deposit sediment in a way that naturally encourages vegetation," Cooper said.

Hickcox added that for nature enthusiasts, the river restoration was a good move "not only from an environmental standpoint, but also visually it will be much more attractive."

For Cooper, and for many others invested in the project, Sunday was momentous. "It is important in so many ways ecologically, but emotionally right now it feels really

good to resolve something that was a mistake. Trying to control a river and channelize it for the human population is never a good idea," Cooper said.

So what happens next? According to town Program Manager Lance McDonald, the commission now will start planning new trails. But he added, "We will wait to see how the landscape functions prior to making any decisions."

McDonald said remaining work should be completed before the end of this month, and the area will be open to the public sometime in November for all to enjoy.