

## AT RUNWAY'S END, RISKY WETLANDS FLOURISHES.

Beaver dams thrill biologists but trouble city's airport manager

By Staci Matlock

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The Santa Fe Municipal Airport manager is worried that beaver activity and thriving wetlands developing in the Santa Fe River below the city sewage-treatment plant will attract larger migratory birds, increasing the risk of the fowl running afoul of airplanes.

People over the summer reported beavers building a couple of dams in the bosque about a mile south of the treatment plant, and at least one person has reported spotting a blue heron recently.

"That particular stretch of the river is right off the end of one of our runways," said Jim Montman, manager of the airport southwest of the city. "We're not against beavers on the river -- just not in that stretch."

"We understand there will always be some birds there," he added, "but we didn't want additional attractants to wildlife in the area."

Biologists on the Santa Fe River Commission are excited about all the activity in the wetlands. Beaver dams slow river flows, letting water pool and spread out across wetlands. Those slow waters and pools attract migratory birds like herons, ducks and other waterfowl, along with other large wildlife such as deer.

The bosque developed in part after the nonprofit Forest Guardians, now WildEarth Guardians, and many volunteers planted willows and cottonwoods in the stretch. Montman said he worked with them to make sure standing wetlands in that portion was not part of the plan. "It has always been a concern of mine, since the day I came to work here in 2001, that we had a river that was a wildlife attractant and might not work well with airplanes," Montman said.

In the last year, he has discussed his concerns with the Santa Fe River Commission, which is developing a management plan for the Santa Fe River.

Gerald Z. Jacobi, commission chairman and a professor of environmental science at New Mexico Highlands University, said the commission wants to "keep the river as natural as possible."

Jacobi said the river commission knows there's a possibility of birds running into planes but doesn't think it is a big risk. "But that's hard to say. We're not in aviation,"

Jacobi acknowledged. "We just happen to be biologists really excited that this is a good functioning wetlands. We feel beavers are part of that success."

Montman hopes the commission will delay recommending wildlife management for that portion of the river in any proposed river management plan until the airport completes a wildlife hazard assessment survey.

Since a flock of geese caused an airline passenger jet in January to make an emergency landing on the Hudson River, the Federal Aviation Administration is requiring all commercial airports to assess wildlife hazards.

Montman said the Santa Fe airport has a \$106,000 federal grant to hire biologists and conduct the assessment in the next few months.

Montman said his primary concern is to prevent planes from running into birds or other wildlife near the runways.

Santa Fe's small airport has experienced far fewer run-ins with birds than the Albuquerque Sunport over the years. Most of the birds hit by planes have been small to medium size, according to statistics kept by the FAA. Since 2002, the airport has reported seven collisions between birds and airplanes and one incident involving a prairie dog. In 2007, the last reported event, a private Citation jet hit a small bird, causing substantial damage to the plane.

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