

RIVERSIDE STORIES

# JIM HASENYAGER

*Landowner on the Escalante River, UT*

*“A Fighting  
Chance”*

**IN 2000, WHEN** Jim Hasenyager and his wife, Charlie, purchased farmland on the Escalante River, Russian olive and other invasive plant species had already taken over the river, causing damage to the natural integrity of the ecosystem.

“The river had been narrowing,” he explains. “It didn’t flood easily, and it was getting choked with Russian olive and tamarisk (salt cedar). There was no scientific plan on our part, we just desired to see the openness of the river.” Although their original intent was to clean up as much of it as they could themselves, ultimately the project became far too much for them to handle on their own.



*“Since we started to allow the cutting, the local folks who had seen what was done decided to get on board.”*

*Photography Credit: Zach Mahone*

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labor as he moves toward retirement. The land that he and Charlie own is the visualization of their dream, and they want to do anything they can to take care of it. “It’s kind of my ‘get-away from work’ retreat,” Jim says cheerfully. “We have an old cabin that was built in the 1860s in Huntsville, that we are reassembling on the farm now. So it’s a place to come and get away from the normal workday life.” ■



That was a much bigger project than we ever realized,” Jim explains. “We made a feeble attempt, but life caught up and we weren’t able to do as much work on it as we would have liked. Then we got approached by a group from Escalante, Utah, the Escalante River Watershed Partnership (ERWP), who asked us to allow them to clear the river.” Most of the local landowners were rather skeptical. “No one would really talk to the ERWP. My wife and I talked about it, and decided we’d be willing to be a demonstration project,” he recalls.

Jim believes the local community’s initial lack of interest in the project stemmed from “uncertainty or fear of becoming involved,” he said. “There is a feeling that they want to remain independent from any outside involvement, and manage their land as they see fit.”

Yet, after the neighbors started to see the improvements made by these programs, particularly on Jim’s land after the Russian olive and tamarisk was removed,

they gradually started to accept the ideas. They realized the advantages of working together with a larger team, such as the ERWP, to acquire the funding and labor necessary, which would otherwise be a monumental undertaking. “It’s such a labor intensive project, that most private individuals aren’t going to have the means to do it. We would not have had the financial means to hire a crew and keep them employed for several months. I think that is the huge benefit these organizations bring, and a huge impediment to anybody doing it privately,” he says.

When the crews began the restoration, the river was a jungle of tamarisk and Russian olive. According to Jim, “It wasn’t walkable. It wasn’t even viewable.” Yet it only took a few months for the crew to clean up their part of the river, and the results were extremely clear. “Since we started to allow the cutting, the local folks who had seen what was done decided to get on board,” Jim explains. “Now [the community] has a group that hires

local fellows to do the cutting as well.”

Although Jim knows that the battle against tamarisk and other invasive species won’t be won too easily, he learned that cooperating with the ERWP and other similar organizations has given him and his wife a fighting chance. In an effort to spread this idea to the community, Jim says, “They don’t need to fear the projects involving the private money foundations and the government. It does require the commitment from the landowner to follow up and keep the land clear though. It’s not something that just can be done and left. There has to be a commitment to keeping the river open. That requires work.”

Jim also looks forward to seeing the results of the hard



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