

RIVERSIDE STORIES

JERI BENEL

FFA Advisor in Mesquite, NV

JERI BENEL, EDUCATOR and Future Farmer's of America (FFA) advisor, has been working diligently for over two decades to engage her local community in agricultural affairs and help them take action on the threats that face the industry. As a high school teacher at the Valley River High School in Mesquite, Nevada, she knows that the best way to encourage activism is by starting with the youth, so she has been working from the ground up to inspire change. One particular issue of concern for her is the impact that invasive plants have had on the local river ecosystem, and in turn the water source that agriculture depends on.

Located in close proximity to the Virgin River, the town of Mesquite depends heavily on the river's health to maintain its natural ecosystem. The prevalence of invasive plant species, such as tamarisk (salt cedar), in the Virgin River's riparian (riverside) system aggressively displaces native vegetation, competes for water resources, channelizes river banks, reduces the quality of wildlife habitat and forage for pollinators, increases the risk of wildfires, and restricts access to scenic landscapes. These impacts can have a direct effect on agricultural infrastructure in the community.

*“Getting Our
Hands Dirty”*

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Photography Credit: Zach Mahone

In order to teach her students about the impacts of invasive plants, Jeri has been coordinating plant removal and area restoration days, as well as classroom programs, to analyze the ecosystem’s balance and required care. “This has been a project that’s taken several years for us,” she says. “We had to take out enough plants for the natural balance to return. As part of the project, we also harvested native willow trees in areas where they were plentiful, and replanted these willows where we’d removed tamarisk.”

The FFA, of which Jeri has been an advisor for seven years, is one of the largest agricultural organizations in the nation, and is focused primarily on educating and enriching high school students who have developed interests in agriculture and leadership. Trying to find an outlet for her students to develop with real hands-on work, Jeri implemented FFA programs at her high school several years ago.

Since then, Jeri has been teaching her students about the fundamentally useful skills that can be gained from agricultural education, and how important the applications of those skills could be for their careers, and local communities. The riparian restoration projects have a two-fold benefit: provid-

-ing an opportunity for students to learn about the broader connections between the river and agriculture, and providing service leadership experiences through hands-on removal projects. “This was an excellent opportunity for kids to get involved in something real, where they could deal with real plants and real information, and do real work that has a benefit in the community,” she explains. She’s had sensational success. Her class size has grown from five people to 140, in just seven years.

“Our whole concept is to have students learn things by actually doing them, not just talking about them,” Jeri says. “We get our hands dirty. In the beginning of this project, we did things we’d never done before. We took soil samples, and we had students learn how to texture soil. We took water samples, and had students test the water. Kids were learning real life skills that they could actually use out in the field or in their career. It gives them those chances and those experiences to discover something that they maybe really like.”

Jeri’s students have also been reaching out locally, working to educate and enlighten the whole community about the problem tamarisk presents to the community, and the work that

needs to be done to restore the river. A few short years ago, for example, Jeri’s FFA students set up a booth at the Clark County Fair, and brought in samples of native and invasive plants to show to the community. “In the beginning, no one really understood much about invasive plants and what was wrong with them. It was a process,” she said. “The response was actually really good. We got really

good reports from parents. At first they were thinking, ‘What is this? What are my kids doing?’, but then we focused on getting our parents aware. Of course, that kind of spread through the community. Quite a few youth groups got involved, like scouting organizations, and church organizations. This went on for four years, where different groups went in and cleared out the invasive plants from the river.”

Although she and her students have already had a considerable impact on the community and the river, Jeri plans to keep moving forward, continuing to engage her students within the agricultural landscape and the connection to the river ecosystem, and lead the charge in the restoration of these vital river systems. “Some [students] have lived on the river their entire lives, and it’s in our community,” she explains. “Most don’t realize the problem of [tamarisk] taking over.” ■

This is part of the Riverside Stories series, brought to you by the Tamarisk Coalition in partnership with Virgin River Conservation Partnership, and funded by the Walton Family Foundation.

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