



Winter Summary 2012

Western Hardrock Watershed Team

An OSM/VISTA Initiative

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The **Western Hardrock Watershed Team** (WHWT) is a coalition of community/watershed improvement groups confronting the challenges that remain from historic mining in the West. We assist rural communities impoverished by environmental degradation and its consequences to make their home-place-watersheds healthier places to live and work.

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OSM/VISTA Melissa May Helps Lead San Juan Watershed Group to New Frontier

OSM/VISTA Melissa May with The San Juan Watershed Group (SJWG) heard this month that they will be receiving a \$500,000 grant from a settlement between BHP Billiton/PNM and the Sierra Club. The SJWG was approached by BHP Billiton back in November about the opportunity to apply for funding. At that time, SJWG was already starting preliminary planning to conduct a microbial source tracking study. Taking advantage of the opportunity, OSM/VISTA Melissa May spearheaded the task of writing and developing the project into a larger and more complete proposal.

The San Juan, Animas, and La Plata Rivers are well known to be plagued with E.coli bacteria pollution, but SJWG had lacked the resources to identify the most significant sources of this bacteria. In developing the project, May worked closely with BHP representatives to fine tune the proposal, outlining a study which will allow the SJWG to determine the animal origin of E. coli bacteria using genetic analyses and trace them back to sources such as leaking septic tanks, livestock from agricultural lands, dog waste from parks and urban areas, or natural wildlife sources.



OSM/VISTA Melissa May

The money was made available due to an initial lawsuit filed by the Sierra Club over concerns that the disposal of fly ash from the San Juan Generating station into the nearby San Juan coal mine had the potential to contaminate groundwater and the San Juan River. The two entities settled out of court for \$10mil, and in addition to addressing the matter of the fly ash, set aside additional money in the settlement for supplemental environmental projects to benefit water quality in the San Juan River.

May believes the money will have a positive impact as her watershed “has a lot of issues and not a lot of funding, so this amount of money is going to have a huge impact.” Money from the grant will also be used to spread the information to the public once the study was completed. The grant includes \$90k for upgrading the SJWG website, creating an expanded GIS database for the region, and conducting public outreach campaigns. Additionally, \$170k is set aside as implementation funding to focus on projects to reduce bacteria pollution once the main sources have been identified. By focusing resources on the most significant bacteria sources, the SJWG and other groups will be better equipped to plan effective projects that measurably reduce E. coli in local water bodies.

May’s supervisor Dave Tomko is thankful for her help and believe SJWG “couldn't have done it without Melissa's hard work and excellent proposal.” He believes the project will be a boon for the organization as well as the watershed and among other benefits, he is expecting it will help “elevate the public's awareness of the SJWG.”