

# EXTENDING BEYOND

## For MVS placement, every day is World Nature Conservation Day

By Travis Duerksen

**W**orld Nature Conservation Day occurs annually on July 28, yet the holiday bears little resemblance to its federally recognized cousins. It isn't marked by parades, bank closures or celebratory picnics. There's nothing commemorative you can buy for it. And, most significantly, it's an occasion that isn't bound by national borders or historical figureheads. Instead, World Nature Conservation Day is a single day in which the citizens of the world are asked to consider how to help the habitat around them survive, flourish and sustain future generations.

For the Mennonite Voluntary Service (MVS) unit in Alamosa, Colorado, the surrounding habitat, and many of the participants' service placements, are linked to the Rio Grande River.

The Rio Grande starts north-west of Alamosa, in the San Juan Mountains of Colorado, and winds its way down the San Luis Valley and through the city itself. The river's eventual destination is the Gulf of Mexico, and on its way there, it serves as a crucial water source for seven Mexican and U.S.



Former MVSer Emma Reesor shares about the work of the Rio Grande Headwaters Restoration Project (RGHRP) at a restored river bend. Alice Price, local MVS coordinator, stands to the right.

states. For Alamosa, close to the river's headwaters, the water makes farming, ranching and fishing possible in an area that is otherwise a high mountain desert.

A bird's-eye view of a bend in the Rio Grande. Erin McWilliams: "This is the Rio Grande #2 Ditch, one of the project sites for the Five Ditches Project. This project involved replacing aging agricultural infrastructure, followed by riparian restoration work on nearby river banks, improving agricultural efficiency, reducing erosion and providing habitat." Photo by Erin McWilliams.

Photo by Barry Bartel

"Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them."

— John 7:38 (NIV)

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Photo by Emma Reesor

RGHRP staff Connor Born, Emma Reesor and Erin McWilliams check up on a river project, using paddleboards. Both Born and Reesor served at RGHRP through Mennonite Voluntary Service positions before being hired onto the program. McWilliams is the current MVS participant in the placement with RGHRP.

“The river is really the lifeblood of the whole community,” said Emma Reesor, executive director of the Rio Grande Headwaters Restoration Project (RGHRP). The non-profit works closely with local farmers, ranchers and community members to restore and conserve the function of the Rio Grande “for the ecosystems, but also for recreation, for agriculture, for the communities and the general public.”

Like the river itself, RGHRP’s long-standing relationship with MVS has allowed both programs to thrive in the community. For the past 10 years, RGHRP has brought MVS participants on staff as restoration project managers.

“I was blown away, when I started as a volunteer, by how much responsibility I was given,” recalled Reesor, who served with the Alamosa MVS unit 2013-2015. “[So] many folks were willing to explain to me how things worked and answer my questions and take me under their wings.”

After her service term ended, Reesor was hired by RGHRP into a paid position, and eventually, she became the executive director of the organization. “My MVS term really set in motion my career to date” Reesor said.

Reesor and her husband, also an alum of MVS, continue to stay connected to the Alamosa unit by serving as an informal host family for participants.

Erin McWilliams, the current MVS participant with RGHRP, began the program after finishing her master’s

degree in environmental engineering. While her schooling focused on wastewater and groundwater quality work, McWilliams has relished the opportunity to put her degree into practice through tangible water projects and community education.

“I’ve learned so much about water here, [with RGHRP],” McWilliams said. “It’s been different and interesting to be

immersed in that other side of water issues ... out here, I could see the engineering work play out, but it’s in a completely different application.”

“Spending time in the beauty God created, especially in such a gorgeous place as the San Luis Valley, makes you value our earth and water more and feel even more motivated to restore it,” said Leah Weaver, who served with RGHRP through the Alamosa MVS unit from 2018-2019.

Weaver described how witnessing people from different backgrounds and political beliefs come together through the work of RGHRP gave her hope. They were united by the work of restoring the watershed that ran through each of their lives, making farming, ranching, fishing and greater community possible.

“In this time of division and polarity, living in [the Alamosa] community and witnessing their sincere collaboration gave me faith in humanity and our ability to save this planet God gave us.” ■

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— Emma Reesor

# Serve with MVS



## Alamosa

Colorado

Enjoy the mountains of rural Colorado and a small Anabaptist fellowship, while meeting critical community needs, such as immigration, housing, restorative justice and environmental restoration.



## Chicago

Illinois

Join life in the diverse Pilsen neighborhood of Chicago, and enjoy fellowship with Chicago Community Mennonite Church. Explore God's call to serve those affected by political, social and economic injustice.



## Aibonito

Puerto Rico

The MVS unit in Aibonito serves with Academia Menonita Betania, a private bilingual Christian school, serving around 160 students, from kindergarten through ninth grade.



## San Francisco

California

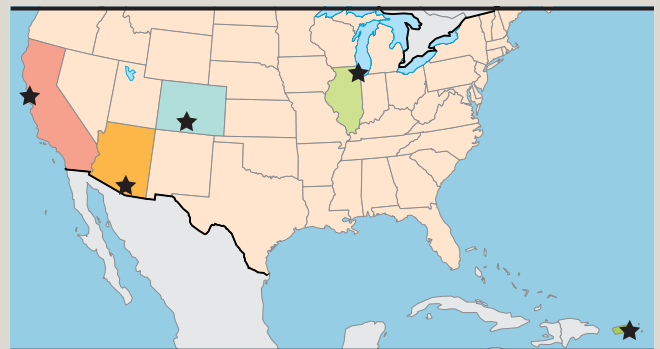
San Francisco MVSers engage with issues of poverty, homelessness and housing in a vibrant urban setting. They also support mothers and children, work with people on the street, and advocate for nonviolent change in society.



## Tucson

Arizona

Nestled between four mountain ranges and buzzing with the energy of a university city, Tucson offers enriching service opportunities. Volunteers work with low-income home repair, teach English literacy, help the community food bank, and more — all while learning about issues surrounding the borderlands and indigenous people.



## TAP A SHOULDER

Apply or find other placements at [MennoniteMission.net/Serve](http://MennoniteMission.net/Serve).

Your support allows programs like MVS to flourish. Mennonite Mission Network service programs connect participants with local non-profits and churches, providing opportunities to grow, learn and take part in what God is doing in communities across the country and around the world. To support these programs, join us in praying for service participants, leaders and partners, and visit [MennoniteMission.net/Donate](https://www.MennoniteMission.net/Donate) today!



Photo provided

Hannah Thill, of the 2020 Alamosa MVS unit, teaches students about composting at her placement with the Rio Grande Watershed Conservation and Education Initiative.



Photo provided

Connor Born, a 2019 MVSer in Alamosa, found meaningful work in the environmental/ecological field through his placement at the RGHRP. This placement involves work from organizing fundraisers, to wading in the river, to collecting data.

## Service and stewardship flow together

A message from Mike Sherrill



When I browse through the news section of our website, I'm reminded of just how incredible our partners are. The work they do, whether in migration outreach, hospitality, sustainability or countless other fields, truly is the work of God.

Our friends at the RGHRP have dedicated their time and energy to conserving and protecting God's creation. Water is the wellspring of human existence — without it, we perish. Protecting that resource is a divine calling. It's not just sustainability work — it is literally

providing life to the people, plants and animals that make up God's kingdom.

Supporting life-giving ministries like this is our calling, and we invite you to partner with us in this ministry by praying for the MVSErs and other volunteers or by sharing your time and money. When we conserve and protect the water in creation, rivers of living water flow from us (see John 7:38). ■

Mike Sherrill  
Executive Director

**Thank you** for being part of what God is doing! How is God calling you to share in additional ways with Mennonite Mission Network?

[www.MennoniteMission.net](https://www.MennoniteMission.net)  
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