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## **Crews Planting Over 3,000 Trees and Shrubs on San Antonio River Mission Reach**

SAN ANTONIO – The Mission Reach of the San Antonio River will soon be one important step closer to a more natural ecosystem. During the coming weeks, crews will be planting 3,005 native trees and shrubs along the first mile of the southern portion of the river south of downtown. This planting is part of the Mission Reach Ecosystem Restoration and Recreation Project, a \$245.7 million, multi-agency project to restore the ecosystem of eight miles of the San Antonio River.

For decades, tourists and residents alike have enjoyed San Antonio's famed River Walk. However, just south of this bustling tourist destination the river was degraded into an unsightly flood control channel. During the 1950s and '60s, the river was channelized to control flooding that plagued the city. Although this incarnation of the river did an excellent job managing flood waters, it was far from a naturally functioning river. The Mission Reach Project will restore the ecosystem and provide recreation opportunities while maintaining the flood conveyance.

Almost one year ago, the first mile of the Mission Reach was opened to the public. Visitors were immediately able to enjoy acres of native grasses and wildflowers, restored aquatic features and hike and bike trails. However, one essential piece of the ecosystem was missing: the trees. The trees and shrubs along the Mission Reach will be planted approximately one to two years after each phase of the project is open to give the native grass and wildflower vegetation time to become established. Young, small trees will be planted because these trees will be more resistant to flooding. As young trees grow in the floodplain, they will grow deep roots and adapt to periodic flooding. If older, taller trees were planted, their roots would be shallower and more prone to being uprooted during flooding. Some species may take up to 50 years to reach full maturity. So, this project is truly a generational project that can be enjoyed today and appreciated as it matures over time.

"This is going to be a natural oasis in the middle of the city", says Bexar County Judge Nelson Wolff. "In 50 years when these trees are mature, this area is going to be unrecognizable. What we are seeing here today is restoration in every sense of the word. We are restoring the ecosystem, we are restoring the cultural and historic connections between San Antonio and the River and we are restoring the vitality of the south side of the county."

Although the Mission Reach Project will extend visitors' experience on the river, it is a very different destination than the historic River Walk. The landscape of the Mission Reach will look wild rather than manicured. Grasses and wildflowers will be allowed to grow to their natural heights rather than mowed. It will be a serene, natural landscape where visitors can enjoy the inherent beauty of the river.

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## Page 2 – Crews Planting Over 3,000 Trees and Shrubs on Mission Reach

“Restoring a healthy ecosystem within the Mission Reach of the San Antonio River is a delicate balance of planting appropriate native plants and maintaining efficient flood water conveyance,” says Lee Marlowe, Natural Resources Management Specialist for the San Antonio River Authority. “The Mission Reach vegetation plan has been designed to mimic the diversity and density of native riparian woodlands that exist naturally under both drought and flood conditions.”

In addition to the ecosystem restoration work that is being completed, the Mission Reach also includes many ways for people, as well as wildlife, to benefit from the river. Overlooks, picnic areas, street connections and pavilions provide areas for visitors to pause and enjoy the river.

“Citizens of the south side literally had an untapped natural resource running through their back yard,” says Bexar County Commissioner Sergio “Chico” Rodriguez. “It may have needed some work, but the river is now going to be something that residents of the Mission Reach area can cherish and enjoy.”

Construction on the entire eight mile Mission Reach Project is slated for completion in 2013. When the tree and shrub planting is completed by 2015, over 23,000 trees will be planted representing over forty native species. For the San Antonio River Authority (SARA), the agency charged with operating and maintaining the Mission Reach, the work is just beginning. Many hours of manual labor will be required to keep as many invasive plant species out of the project as possible. During one week in August 2010, SARA staff hand pulled over 3 tons of weeds from the ground.

“This is definitely a long-term commitment for the agency, but restoring the river is something that we are committed to seeing happen,” says SARA Board Chairman Gaylon Oehkle. “We have an amazing crew overseeing the project and I am certain that we will exceed the community’s expectations.”

For more information about the Mission Reach Project visit [www.sanantonioriver.org](http://www.sanantonioriver.org).

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*The Mission Reach Ecosystem Restoration and Recreation Project is transforming an eight mile stretch of the San Antonio River into a quality riparian woodland ecosystem. The Mission Reach project is being primarily funded by Bexar County, with additional funding from the City of San Antonio, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the San Antonio River Foundation. The San Antonio River Authority (SARA) is overseeing construction on the project and will oversee operations, maintenance and concessions when the project is complete. For more information about this project please visit [www.sanantonioriver.org](http://www.sanantonioriver.org).*