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Pre-manufactured marsh grasses installed along Silver Bow Creek after transplant from Idaho

By Roberta Forsell Stauffer of The Montana Standard - 08/07/2004

Instant habitat has arrived in Butte direct from Rexburg, Idaho.

The wetlands sod was grown to order for use along the Metro Storm Drain corridor where Silver Bow Creek once flowed through the

valley. It comes in rolled-up strips measuring roughly 3 feet by 16 feet and weighing up to 150 pounds each.

"I call it swamp on a rope," said Butte-Silver Bow Reclamation Specialist Tom Malloy.

The mix of sedges and rushes grew inside a coconut rope bag filled with coconut fiber, the product of Native Sod Solutions. The two-year-old company has offices in Driggs, Idaho, and Livingston and grows its wetlands sod hydroponically in five acres of shallow pools near Rexburg.

Company manager Matt Dowdell said this job — which he called "the eyelash on the elephant" compared to all the other Superfund-related work in Butte — is unique in that the sod is going in the middle of an urban area.

"A lot of the projects that we have done to date have been centered more around building lakes and ponds or restoring streams, working with state, federal agencies on habitat projects," he said. "To be doing a project in Butte with the mining history that's there and being in an obviously urban setting — it's frankly very much the type of project we would like to continue to do — taking a less than desirable situation and improving it."

Malloy explained that

former county reclamation specialist Matt Vincent

lobbied hard for putting mature vegetation in right alongside the newly constructed stream channel. It would be difficult to grow those types of plants from seed in Butte's climate, Malloy said.

The Atlantic Richfield Co. agreed to pay for the special sod — which Dowdell says retails for \$185 a strip — provided Butte-Silver Bow installed it.

Arco received a discounted price since the company bought well in excess of

400 units, but Project Manager Vladimir Babich declined to provide specifics. He said that he thinks it's looking good and that county crews did a good job installing the sod.



Fall / Winter 2005



"We want to work with Butte-Silver Bow in trying to give the citizens a nice-looking channel and a walking trail," Babich said.

Erosion control is the main advantage of the instant wetlands, according to Malloy. Once the roots get established in their new home, they'll hold the soil in place when major storms and thaws send water rushing down the open storm drain.

To ensure the mats stay in place long enough to take root, crews drove wooden stakes down through them. The stakes and the coconut rope will eventually decompose, leaving only the plants.

To wet the channel, the county has started sending a portion of the water piped in from Silver Lake down it. So far, about a million gallons a day have been pumped to the channel from a hydrant near the county shops, but in a few weeks that amount will about triple once a new pipe connection is completed, Malloy said.

Butte-Silver Bow plans to use Silver Lake water to wet the channel until water from the Horseshoe Bend

treatment plant needs to be discharged.

Malloy said the stream channel may look tempting to wade in and play around, but he urged people to stay off it this year while the sod is trying to establish itself.

"Right now, the roots haven't attached to the ground yet," he said. "Hopefully by next summer we'll have a nice swamp."

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