

THIS PLACE:

## A way to farm the desert

Indian tribe plans to use waste wood to revive land, break ground on business opportunity



Las Vegas DirtWorkz employees watch as mulch made from waste wood products piles up Wednesday on the Moapa Paiute Indian Reservation. Mulch will be sold, as well as used to restore farmland. "We can grow whatever you want out here," says Ray Becerra, organic waste coordinator for the soil remediation company.

**By Brendan Buhler**

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Way outside of Las Vegas, halfway to Utah, over the Moapa riverbed and past the horses and cattle grazing on clover, something new is rumbling on the reservation. Diesel motors chug and roar as they turn machinery that chews wood scrap into flinders and the wind launches what's left into a face-stinging dust cloud. Normally, with the wind like this, the machines wouldn't be running, but this day is different.

The Moapa Band of Paiutes is demonstrating how it can use the debris of Las Vegas to help build the tribe's future — an organic farm. Assembled upwind are the tribal chairman, members of the farm board, the CEO of Evergreen Recycling, and Ray Becerra, who has plans for the wood.

The scraps — wood from demolished buildings, wood from broken pallets — are being ground into giant heaps of mulch to shelter crops and save water. Or the mulch can be turned into potting soil with the addition of nitrogen-rich manure from a nearby dairy. The tribe can sell the mulch and soil, and it will, but there are bigger plans, says Becerra. He is the organic waste coordinator for Las Vegas DirtWorkz, a soil remediation company that, like the recycling company that hauls in two or three tractor-trailers full of wood waste every day, is partners with the tribe.

The first order of business is to repair the tribe's 20-year-old, vandalized greenhouses, spread over 15 acres. A year from now, Becerra hopes, they'll be producing seedlings of native trees, sago and fan palms and some potato seedlings for sale to Utah farms. Next: restore 200 acres of farmland, plowing wood and manure into the soil, installing drip irrigation and mulch. The first crop will probably be an experimental variety of alfalfa.

If all that works, maybe all 2,000 acres of farmland can be restored. And if the trend toward local, organic food comes to Las Vegas? The Paiutes will be ready. "We can grow whatever you want out here," Becerra says.

Phil Swain, the tribal chairman, says the organic farm is as important to the tribe as the travel plaza off Interstate 15, where the tribe sells gas, food, handicrafts, cigarettes, liquor and fireworks. It's putting children through school and funding the tribe's plans, bit by bit.

"We can't compete with the big gaming establishments in Nevada. It's not like in other states where tribes don't have to compete with anyone," Swain says. But maybe someday the tribe will build a casino. Right now, there's the farm to restore.

Swain remembers what used to be out here, before the tribe closed its greenhouses and leased most of its water rights to the Southern Nevada Water Authority. The tribe grew watermelons and cantaloupe (to the delight of the jackrabbit population). Swain used to go down to the river to eat wild berries and roast corn on the bank.

"If you can close your eyes and just imagine a stream pouring down with 100-year-old cottonwood trees and rocks creating pools for the kids to swim in all summer long ...

"That was paradise," Swain says.