

MIDDLE RIO GRANDE WATER ASSEMBLY

Annual Report

June, 2005—June, 2006

On the eve of our tenth anniversary, it is only fitting to acknowledge all those who have contributed time, energy and resources to the Middle Rio Grande Water Assembly. Citizen advocacy, expertise, and enthusiasm constitute the 'grassroots / bottom-up' approach that has fueled regional water planning throughout New Mexico, and volunteers with an abiding sense of commitment have been key to the Water Assembly's longevity and success. The organization is particularly famous for its profound pledge to public involvement: a "region" is an amalgam of its resident passions, and we are defined by what we're willing to defend.

2005 Annual Assembly

The 9th Annual MRG Water Assembly ("Our Water Is Overallocated,") was held on June 11, 2005, and drew a crowd of about one hundred. Former State Engineer Thomas Turney told the gathering that water in the middle basin was "fully appropriated" at the time of the signing of the Rio Grande Compact. Since then, population growth, unsustainable aquifer pumping, the OSE's 'dedication' policy regarding the transfer of water rights for development, and uncertainty over unadjudicated Native American and pre-1907 water right claims in the basin have resulted in a regional water debt. Confronting the reality of over-allocation is prerequisite to successful implementation of the regional water plan, and to moving toward hydrologic sustainability in the Middle Rio Grande. A full transcript of the 2005 Assembly presentations and discussion is available on the Water Assembly web page, at www.waterassembly.org.

2005-06 Focus

Adopting far-sighted public policy depends upon a well-educated public. Participants at the 2005 Annual Assembly identified outreach and education as the organization's main focus for the year, with emphasis on publicizing the effects of the regional water deficit, and on encouraging local governments to make use of the MRG water plan recommendations.

Water Assembly Board

Board members are elected at the annual Water Assembly to represent six advocacy groups. Delegates and alternates(*) for 2005-06 were:

Agricultural Business and Production: Glenn Young, Robert Kyzer, Marcia Fernández*

Cultural and Historic Water Uses: Lynn Montgomery, Will Oulette, Lisa Robert*

Environmental Preservation and Improvement: John Sparks, Marty Mitchell, Richard Barish*

Industrial, Institutional and Business: Andrew Homer, Bob Wessely, Russ Koger*

Residential Water Use: Marti Reed, Martin Zehr, Kevin Bean*

Technical Specialty: Larry Shore, Ed Payne, Jack Reed*

Water Assembly Officers

The Water Assembly's annual business meeting was held on June 14, 2005. Officers elected for 2005-06 were: Ed Payne (President); Martin Zehr (Vice-President); Larry Shore (Secretary); and Elaine Hebard (Treasurer).

List Serve and Website

During 2005, the Water Assembly list serve moved from its former home under the City of Albuquerque, to Hostek. The list serve continues to provide an open forum for the discussion of relevant water issues and timely notice of upcoming events. To sign up, send an email to mrgwa@waterassembly.org, with “subscribe mrgwa” in the subject line (without quotes). The Assembly is also updating its website with the assistance of Leslie Kryder of Leslie Consulting, LC, who serves as volunteer webmaster. The site contains both the Middle Rio Grande and Rio Puerco-Rio Jemez water plans, the regional water budget, links to various key studies and reports, and an archive that includes transcripts of Annual Water Assembly presentations, and minutes of all board and committee meetings.

Water Planning Decision Support System

In partnership with the UNM Earth Data Analysis Center, the Water Assembly submitted a proposal to the State Legislature in 2006, seeking funding for an open source, open access, web-based Water Planning Decision Support System to assist planners, agency officials, stakeholders and the general public in understanding current hydrologic conditions and comparing possible water use scenarios, planning options, and land use implications in the basin. The existing Middle Rio Grande model was developed jointly by Sandia National Labs and the Water Assembly for the water planning process, but it contains no graphic or spatial component. With a spatially oriented model, separate data layers that represent different geographic attributes could be combined and presented in the form of maps, making information more visible and accessible to the general public. The Decision Support System would interface with but also be entirely independent of other models such as those used by the State Engineer and federal water management agencies. The funding request was cut from the final legislative budget.

Meeting with ISC Commissioners

In October 2005, representatives of the Water Assembly were invited to meet with Interstate Stream Commissions Judith Espinosa and Blane Sanchez, both of whom live in the Middle Rio Grande, to review progress on the regional plan, and to discuss concerns and problems with its implementation.

Participation in Other Forums

Last year, the Albuquerque Bernalillo County Water Utility Authority established a Water Resources Advisory Committee of fourteen citizens to give advice on policies governing the Authority’s Long-Range Water Conservation Strategy, and to develop a work program consistent with those recommendations. One seat is specifically reserved for a member of the Water Assembly’s Executive Committee. Treasurer Elaine Hebard served as Chair of the WRAC in 2005, and another Assembly member, Kevin Bean, is the committee’s current Chair. The group is concentrating on updating the Authority’s water budget in order to balance use with renewable supply. The committee’s draft report will be presented to the Authority in June, 2006. To find out more about the Authority and the WRAC, visit www.cabq.gov/wua.

The Water Assembly also requested and won a voting seat on the Interstate Stream Commission’s Ad Hoc Committee on Regional Water Planning, assembled to help interface regional water plans with the 2003 State Water Plan. Elaine Hebard was named as the Water Assembly delegate to the committee, with former Water Assembly president Bob Wessely as alternate. The Ad Hoc Committee will recommend procedures for resolving differences between the State and regional water plans, and strategies for funding the implementation of regional plans. For more information on the Ad Hoc Committee’s membership, purpose, procedures and meetings, check out the links at http://www.ose.state.nm.us/isc_planning_ad_hoc.html.

Water Assembly members participated in the Smart Growth Summit Alliance (formerly the NM Livability Connection,) initiated by 1000 Friends of New Mexico, which adopted the MRG regional water plan as a key element of focus for implementation and public engagement; and the newly-formed Middle Rio Grande Albuquerque Reach Watershed Group, which undertook a critique of draft proposals for Clean Water Act Section 319 funding and actions. Water Assembly past president Janet Jarratt served as co-chair of the MRG Endangered Species Act Collaborative Program, and Assembly member Lisa Robert wrote a ten-year review and update of the

The Middle Rio Grande Ecosystem Bosque Biological Management Plan in cooperation with the Middle Rio Grande Bosque Initiative (<http://mrgbi.fws.gov>), Rio Grande Restoration, and the Bosque Improvement Group.

Outreach Projects

In April of 2006, the Water Assembly hosted a public forum on the Rio Grande Compact in conjunction with UNM's Water Resources Program and the New Mexico Water Dialogue. The Assembly hopes this will become an annual event to circulate information and promote discussion about decisions made by the Rio Grande Compact Commission. Assembly members are also working on a "Water 101" series for UNM's Continuing Education program, another program to encourage science fair projects related to water and water issues in the region, and a short documentary on the subject of water overallocation and adjudication in the Middle Rio Grande.

Challenges

Water Assembly Treasurer Elaine Hebard addressed the New Mexico Water Dialogue's annual meeting of regional water planners in January of 2006. Having completed a regional water plan has not solved the Middle Rio Grande's water troubles, she said, and there are a number of impediments to its overall mission of balancing use with renewable supply.

- As indicated by the Middle Rio Grande collaborative model, the region's overall hydrologic debt includes nearly .6 cubic mile, or 2,025,000 acre-feet withdrawn from groundwater through 2005. Even if this deficit can be reduced by direct municipal use of San Juan Chama water, the debt will continue to be a factor for an unknown number of decades.
- Some water users believe that meeting the Rio Grande Compact is not a regional concern, but rather an obligation for the State to enforce.
- There are perhaps four times as many paper water rights in the region as wet water, but in keeping with instructions from the State, the issue of water rights was not addressed in the regional water plan. In order to balance the regional water budget, knowing the ownership of water is critical, yet the MRG is not on the State Engineer's five-year plan to adjudicate; water transfers continue to be approved; and domestic wells continue to be drilled, adding more and more users to our over-allocated basin.
- Over the past forty years, urban growth has resulted in serious aquifer depletion, and although water conservation measures have reduced the per capita usage, the population continues to grow.
- The regional water plan contains two sub-regional plans (MRG and Rio Puerco-Rio Jemez) with differing Public Welfare Statements. There are also local data gaps, particularly in the Rio Jemez and Rio Puerco basins, that hinder management options.
- Coordination between and among the region's local governments has been minimal. The partnership between the Mid Region Council of Governments and the Water Assembly was dissolved after Interstate Stream Commission acceptance of the Regional Water Plan, and currently, there is no arrangement to prepare any updates or to print copies.

Implementation In Progress

Nevertheless, much work consistent with the recommendations of the regional water plan *is* underway in the Middle Rio Grande. Following a course of action developed by the Water Assembly's Plan Monitoring and Implementation Progress working team, the Middle Rio Grande Water Resources Board drafted a survey to track the thirty-two water plan recommendations that can be implemented by local governments; Bernalillo County finalized and adopted a comprehensive Water Conservation Plan, (available at www.bernco.gov); with funding from the State Natural Resources Trustee, the Mid-Region Council of Governments drafted sample

water conservation ordinances for several communities; construction continues on the Albuquerque-Bernalillo County Water Authority Drinking Water Project to divert San Juan-Chama water from the river for direct use; urban and agricultural drought measures have been activated by various local governments; the Middle Rio Grande Conservancy District has made significant improvements in flow measurement and management of irrigation water deliveries; multiple agencies are cooperating to reduce exotic vegetation and fuel load in the Rio Grande bosque; a water acquisition program and projects to enhance habitat and create refugia for endangered species in the region are being funded by the Endangered Species Act Collaborative Program; and to promote coordination and cooperation between the three water planning regions of the middle basin, the New Mexico Interstate Stream Commission, the New Mexico Water Dialogue, and UNM's Utton Transboundary Resources Center will host three "Upstream/Downstream" workshops in the summer of 2006.



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The Water Assembly is a non-profit, citizen-based, all-volunteer organization incorporating a broad array of water interests and knowledge. Having completed the Regional Water Plan, its continuing purpose is to assure effective implementation of the Middle Rio Grande Regional Water Plan through an open, inclusive, and participatory process so as to achieve the common interests of the people and stakeholders of the region for a sustainable water future that balances water use with renewable supply in accordance with the stated goals of the Water Plan. For information on the Plan and about the Water Assembly, see the web site at www.WaterAssembly.org.