



Middle Rio Grande Water Assembly

Newsletter

State Accepts MRG Regional Water Plan

On August 17, 2004, the New Mexico Interstate Stream Commission unanimously accepted the Middle Rio Grande Regional Water Plan, which encompasses Sandoval, Bernalillo and Valencia Counties.

Developed through a partnership between the MRG Water Assembly and the Middle Rio Council of Governments' Water Resources Board, and accomplished for the Rio Puerco and Rio Jemez subregions by the Cuba Soil and Water Conservation District, the plan is the result of seven years; more than a hundred general public meetings throughout the region; a similar number of briefings to agencies, groups, and governing bodies; over five hundred Water Assembly meetings; more than fifty Water Resources Board meetings; some 30,000 person-hours of volunteer expertise; and about \$1.2 million in state, local government, and private funds for technical consultants and MRCOG staff.

According to the plan, during the last twenty five years the region has consumed an average of 15% more water than it received. The resulting deficit has been made up by the mining of aquifers in the region, and a lowering of the water table by 160 feet in some places. Population increase has placed additional stress on the resource, even though much of this has occurred during the wettest quarter century in the past 2000 years. To address such trends, the mission of the water plan is to balance water use with renewable supply.

The plan focuses on the availability of "wet water" (water we use) as opposed to "paper water" (the legal right to use water). This is not to belittle the importance of settling legal rights to water, i.e., who pays for it and who gets paid for it. However, for planning purposes, the decision was made to first address ways to grapple with the past and present deficit, so as to ensure sufficient water for the future.

The Plan contains forty-three recommendations in nine categories, none of which can alone provide a solution to the water deficit. Rather, the recommendations are a shopping list of actions that private, local, regional, state, tribal and federal entities could consider for implementation, offering a major step in meeting the demanding mission of the Water Plan.

The MRG Water Plan consists of a brochure, a sixty-page summary, and a 400-page full plan. The Subregional Plan contains similar material. The Mid-Region Council of Governments is placing paper copies of these documents at local government offices and local libraries. In addition, supporting technical and

analysis data, and public process and background data are available on CDROM.

www.WaterAssembly.org

The Water Assembly website contains the complete MRG Regional and Sub-Regional Water Plans; notification of current Water Assembly events; news articles and information regarding water-related activities; and an archive of documents from the seven-year planning process. In addition, Assembly participants are working with Sandia National Laboratories to install the Middle Rio Grande Cooperative Water Model, a system dynamics model developed as an educational tool for community-based planning, on the website sometime next year. We request your patience as the website is currently being revised. For more information, please e-mail Bob Prendergast at rnptep@swcp.com.

8th Water Assembly Explores 'Urgent Shortfall Reality'

Last June, the Middle Rio Grande Water Assembly took on a difficult and worrisome subject. At its eighth annual meeting, the volunteer organization which recently completed a water plan for the most populous region in the state, explored what it calls the "urgent shortfall reality" (see Sections 9.3.2 and 10.1.2 of the MRG water plan). In the near future, Assembly participants believe, current water use in the Middle Rio Grande will have to be curtailed in order for New Mexico to meet its Rio Grande Compact requirements. The Assembly laid out a sobering and credible case that in the unadjudicated basin of the central Rio Grande, decades of imprudent pumping, a disconnect between groundwater and surface water policy, and strong pressure from development interests have set the stage for a priority battle over water that is unprecedented in our state.

As conference moderator John Brown explained, "The MRG Regional Water Plan identifies the Urgent Shortfall Reality when it says, 'the initial implementation schedule for the plan's Preferred Scenario may leave the Rio Grande Compact in shortfall for ten to twenty years.' The broad goal of our regional water plan is to balance use with renewable water supply. Meeting that goal involves two objectives: one physical, and one legal. Physically it means we have to stop mining our aquifer. The second objective is a constraint on the first: the state must deliver a certain amount of Rio Grande water to its downstream neighbors, Texas and Mexico. But here's the rub: we can't simply replace our use of groundwater with surface water because the two are linked in complex ways, and what humans do with either one affects the other. Nor does Albuquerque's plan to use its allotment of San Juan-Chama water actually secure our water future.

"It should be understood by all of us that there is no plausible way the state will allow itself to default on its compact obligations. The state will act, but the decisions it makes may be draconian. We must anticipate a squeeze while the state takes action to prevent default. Whether or not the region has an obligation to figure out how to meet the USR, it is in our best interest to give the State Engineer some sound recommendations about options that will inflict the least pain on our region."

Information about the 'shortfall' and its ramifications for the MRG were presented in the form of two panels. The first outlined the science and policy that point to a future pinch. Vince Tidwell of Sandia National Laboratory described what planners have learned from the interactive computer model created for the Assembly over the last several years: "Basically two things are happening. One is that our climate is moderating after twenty very wet years. The 1980s and 1990s were unusually wet, so as we move toward a drier climate, other problems are no longer masked. Primarily, what I think is driving things is river leakage, which has been increasing over time due to pumping from all the utilities along the middle Rio Grande...The rate of river leakage is [outpacing] the rate of water in the river and that's having an affect on our ability to meet the compact."

USGS's Jim Bartolino agreed in summarizing the hydrologic reality of the MRG basin. "Groundwater depletion is defined as 'long term water level declines caused by sustained groundwater pumping.' You've probably seen the map by Laura Bexfield and Scott Anderholm showing water level declines of over 160 feet beneath some parts of Albuquerque, so I think its fair to say that we're in a groundwater depletion situation. [Groundwater depletion can effect] a reduction to surface flow in several different ways. It can intercept groundwater that naturally flowed to surface water. In Albuquerque, that's what's happened. The aquifer used to discharge to the river, and by pumping, we're intercepting a lot of water that was going to the stream. Another way it can happen is if the stream is a 'losing stream,' i.e., one that contributes water to the aquifer through an area. By lowering the water level in the aquifer we increase the rate of water coming from the stream."

Rolf Schmidt-Peterson, Interstate Stream Commission engineer in the Middle Rio Grande, offered some insights on the three-state agreement that apportions the natural flow of the Rio Grande among its many users. "In New Mexico, there are really three areas of consumption under the compact and fortunately or unfortunately, the middle valley is the only one that has an explicit requirement. From the state line at Colorado down to Otowi Bridge, New Mexico is allowed to deplete or consume the [same amount of] water it consumed under 1929 conditions. If we consume more than that, we are going to have to reduce the amount of water that's available for uses in the middle valley.

"The compact doesn't affect the obligations of the United States to Indian tribes or impair their rights. What that means in the middle valley is a big question, and one that will be played out over many years. Also, imported water from the San Juan-Chama Project is not subject to Rio Grande Compact apportionment so we actually account it outside of native water.

"What are our choices as we move into debt conditions? Many are saying 'priority administration,' but we don't have an adjudicated basin, so how are you going to do that? I think how you do it is with active water resource management. The State Engineer and the ISC develop a plan using what we know of priorities, and then we'll basically make 'a call' on water supplies in order to make our deliveries and get water to as many people as necessary. We'll say, 'this is the year' and then figure out how to make it happen down the river."

On the subject of priority administration, Paul Saavedra of the New Mexico Office of the State Engineer told Water Assembly attendees the following day, "The

Doctrine of Prior Appropriation is associated with senior water rights, and those get the water first. In this state, the most senior rights right now are the pueblos and other Native Americans, agriculture, and livestock. Unfortunately, junior water rights are essentially recreation, municipalities, and industry...In order to do priority administration, we need to adjudicate water rights...the Middle Rio Grande is at present not being adjudicated. What we're trying right now are other options—shortage sharing, rotation, and water banking. Priority administration is the law in the state, [but] as someone said about water compacts, it is rather draconian: in priority administration, you cut people off. It hurts, and it hurts the economy...Because of the drought we are in a critical situation as far as the State Engineer Office goes. We've never been faced with such a dilemma before, with trying to get water to all these people. There is increasing population, increasing water use, no new super projects like San Juan-Chama on the horizon, limited water resources, and limited funding from the legislature. It conflicts directly with economic growth, and it has been a tremendous challenge."

Other conference speakers sketched the possible ramifications of a shortfall in the Middle Rio Grande. Efforts to restore the riparian forest known as the bosque and to recover two endangered species in the region would undoubtedly suffer if more water must be delivered downstream; the overall environment, agricultural economy, already-declining groundwater levels, and numerous domestic wells could also be seriously impacted. Economic consequences can be expected through the region if industrial and urban growth continue without reference to the hydrologic picture, and the still-undetermined senior water rights of the MRG's six Indian Pueblos and historic acequias may also be in jeopardy, even though they are guaranteed by state and federal law.

The MRG Water Plan outlines a number of conservation strategies and policy changes that can be adopted to help stretch precious water resources. Eventually, though, decision makers will have to learn to respect the region's limited carrying capacity.

The full text of the 8th Annual MRG Water Assembly is available at www.WaterAssembly.org.

MRGWA Reorganizes to Aid In Water Plan Implementation

With a completed Middle Rio Grande Regional Water Plan to its credit, the MRG Water Assembly has reorganized and modified its charter to "assure, through an open, inclusive and participatory process, the effective implementation, monitoring and updating" of that plan.

Last June, Annual Assembly participants devoted several hours to a discussion of the organization's future, and how it might be of service to local entities as they consider implementing the recommendations of the water plan. Using concepts developed last spring by members of the Assembly's Action Committee, working teams were proposed as the basis of the new organization rather than specific constituency groups. Annual meeting participants agreed to volunteer for one or more of the working teams, and to meet over the summer to decide how to proceed with each group's priorities.

On October 18, 2004, the Assembly's annual business meeting was reconvened, and a set of revised bylaws was adopted. (The new Bylaws and Articles of Incorporation will soon be available on the Assembly website.) As provided in the revised bylaws, Action Committee members and/or alternates in attendance at the October meeting were established as an Interim Board of Directors for the Water Assembly. The board members are: D.R. Anderson, Richard Barrish, Kevin Bean, B.J. Brock, Corinne Brooks, John Brown, Marcia Fernandez, Jessie Fitzgerald, Elaine Hebard, Janet Jarratt, Marty Mitchell, Lisa Robert, Anne Rustebakke, Phil Pohl, Bob Prendergast, and Bob Wessley. Interim Board officers are Janet Jarratt, President; Elaine Hebard, Vice-President; Corinne Brooks, Secretary; and Bob Prendergast, Treasurer.

An election to replace the Interim Board will be held at the next Annual Water Assembly on June 11, 2005. Two members and one alternate will be selected by each of six advocacy groups: Agricultural Business and Production; Cultural and Historic Water Use; Environmental Preservation and Improvement; Industrial, Institutional and Business; Residential Water Use; and Technical Specialty.

Water Assembly Working Teams are also being finalized. Topics include Education and Outreach, Government and Interregional Support, Plan Implementation Monitoring and Progress, Cooperative Modeling Refinement, and Administration and Finance.

Public participation is crucial to the success of the regional water plan. The Assembly maintains a list serve for announcements and general discussion. To participate, send a message to majordomo@cabq.gov with "subscribe mrgwp" in the body text. All meetings of the Water Assembly Board and Working Groups are open to the public and will be announced on the list serve. You may also contact Assembly President Janet Jarratt, at 865-1430, jj@jj2people.com, or website manager Bob Prendergast, at 857-9225, rrnptep@swcp.com.