

## **Consuelo Bokum: State needs water use plan**

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Aridity compounded by drought, population growth and, increasingly, the impacts of climate change are all having profound impacts on New Mexico.

It is unlikely most of us will abandon where we live, as others before us did when water supply became scarce, but it is possible that those who stay won't be as happy living here as we are now.

We can take action to prevent or minimize the potential disruption that comes, as the gap between available water supply and growing demand increases. It makes sense to plan for the future.

Middle Rio Grande residents completed a regional water plan in 2004. The plan, available online at [www.waterassembly.org](http://www.waterassembly.org), analyzed supply and demand. The plan revealed the region was using about 15 to 20 percent more than its renewable water supply by pumping ground water that wasn't being replenished.

If the region keeps relying on "mined" ground water to balance its water budget, that source will be depleted, and the region won't meet its demand.

In a case involving El Paso in the early 1980s, a federal court ruled New Mexico's statute banning export of water to other states violated the Interstate Commerce Clause of the U.S. Constitution but indicated a state may prevent "uncontrolled" transfers of water out of state, based on conservation and public welfare considerations.

New Mexico amended many of the statutes in its water code to take public welfare into account. Among those statutes were two providing for regional water planning and requiring regional water plans give an "adequate review of . . . the effect on the public welfare."

Public welfare is important, because it enables us to ask questions about our use of water. For example: Do we want to promote more sustainable uses of our water? Should we encourage only those industries that do not need large amounts of water to move here? Can we avoid drying up our rural areas and our rivers to supply water to growing urban areas? How do we ensure adequate water supplies for our growing urban areas?

Developing a public welfare statement is a way to define those things we care about and don't want to lose and those things that are needed for our future and need protection. Once those questions are asked and answered, a plan can identify strategies and actions to get where we want to go. The plan can balance possible alternatives to ensure the public welfare is addressed.

The middle Rio Grande water plan developed a public welfare statement, but many say it's too general and will not provide sufficient guidance in selecting competing

alternatives to close the gap between supply and demand. The Water Assembly will be working to update the public welfare statement.

If you want to participate, you can e-mail Ed Payne, president of the Water Assembly, at: [ed.payne@comcast.net](mailto:ed.payne@comcast.net).