

# Commentary: Let's talk agua

## Learn about our state's limited resource and our legal obligation to deliver water downstream at a public forum

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### Water watch

This article is part of an occasional series Insight and Opinion is running on water issues that affect New Mexico. Initially, the articles are being written by the Middle Rio Grande Water Assembly ([WaterAssembly.org](http://WaterAssembly.org)). The assembly and the University of New Mexico are sponsoring a public forum on Thursday to discuss water issues. The forum will take place at the UNM Continuing Education Center at 1634 University Blvd. N.E. from 6:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m.

### Today's byline

Hebard is a Middle Rio Grande Water Assembly volunteer.

Nearly 10 years ago, a group of water experts gathered available data and crunched the numbers. The result was the water budget for the middle Rio Grande.

Accepted by the Water Assembly and later by local governments and the Interstate Stream Commission as a part of our area's Regional Water Plan, the budget showed us there is a quantifiable deficit between renewable supply and demand. This deficit gave rise to 43 recommendations to either augment the water supply or reduce demand. The water plan can be found at [www.WaterAssembly.org](http://www.WaterAssembly.org).

The results of the water budget were corroborated by a study done for the Interstate Stream Commission in 2004.

While a number of constraints exist against continuing the status quo - let alone increasing our water consumption - one constraint which stands out is the Rio Grande Compact.

The compact is the interstate agreement that allocates the amount of river water that Colorado, New Mexico and Texas receive.

Depending on weather conditions, the compact specifies the amount of water that New Mexico must deliver across Elephant Butte Dam each year. By doing so, the compact

constrains water usage in the middle Rio Grande, so that citizens in three states may enjoy the river's benefits.

Each March, a determination is made as to whether New Mexico has complied with its obligations. Protracted failures would have severe consequences. The 2004 Interstate Stream Commission study indicates that, if our region does nothing more than it has been doing, the state will violate the compact in three out of every five years.

Violating the compact would impose severe hardships on all New Mexicans - much as its violations of the Pecos Compact have. Not only did the state have to pay \$14 million in fines and deliver the required water in the case of the Pecos, New Mexico also has spent millions of dollars purchasing back water rights. Regional economies are negatively affected as their tax bases dissipate.

Violating the compact is not an option, especially not as a management tool. And yet, if we do not learn to live within our means, full deliveries will be difficult.

Annually, our region - which includes Valencia, Sandoval and Bernalillo counties - continues to use between 55,000 and 110,000 acre-feet more than is being renewed. For some perspective, this would equate to a vertical column of water 10 to 20 miles deep, over an area the size of a football field, which, without the end zones, is roughly an acre in size.

Living within our means - or balancing use with renewable supply - means hard choices must be made by all of us.

Please come on to the second annual Rio Grande Compact Forum to learn more. The Middle Rio Grande Water Assembly and the University of New Mexico Water Resources Program are sponsoring a free public forum on Thursday at the Continuing Education Center, 1634 University Blvd. N.E. in Albuquerque, 6:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m.

Rolf Schmidt Petersen, the Interstate Stream Commission Rio Grande Basin manager, will offer an overall outline of compact issues and will cover the accounting for 2006, as well as the forecast for what 2007 looks like at this time.

Em Hall, professor of water law at UNM's law school, who is knowledgeable about the Pecos, will speak about some of the upcoming issues. Through questions and public discussion, learn why the Rio Grande Compact is important to you.