

Commentary: A drop in the bucket

The Middle Rio Grande Water Assembly is a group of people just like you who work to make sure New Mexico will have water in the future. But they need more help.

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TODAY'S BYLINE

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Recently Gov. Bill Richardson declared 2007 the "Year of Water". Most of us don't concern ourselves with water issues or realize how critical our water resource is to our well-being and security in this desert environment.

Did you realize there is a group of your fellow citizens who volunteer countless hours and energy trying to resolve our water issues? We have been working hard for over a decade to develop a regional water plan for the region of Sandoval, Bernalillo and Valencia counties to ensure that your water will be there now and for the future. We call ourselves the Middle Rio Grande Water Assembly, and we succeeded in completing our regional plan three years ago. We continue to update and refine it and encourage local governments to implement it.

Richardson's Year of Water is a welcome initiative, but to date it is seen mainly an effort to get the Legislature to appropriate funds for various projects and administrative sectors. We encourage a broader focus.

The Middle Rio Grande region has been consuming approximately 15 percent to 20 percent more water than is renewably supplied. This deficit-consumption of our precious resource means we are taking water from future users and uses, as well as jeopardizing downstream deliveries.

While state government requested and supported multi-year regional water planning processes for New Mexico's 16 regions, it has not supported implementation of these plans. The Water Assembly hopes that in this Year of Water, the Legislature will allocate a substantial portion of reported additional revenues to support implementation of regional water plans - in particular, to pay for the following:

- The Office of the State Engineer, to start hydrographic surveys of the Middle Rio Grande Basin - an initial step toward adjudication - including the public participation component.
- Adjudication of Middle Rio Grande water rights annually and separately, so as to not draw away from other adjudications.

- The state's Permanent Water Trust Fund, to continue water planning, including updates to regional water plans, together with other water projects. A mechanism should be established for equitable distribution of funding.
- The Interstate Stream Commission, to ensure that updates of regional water plans keep pace with events.
- The Interstate Stream Commission, to support a broad water education program.
- The Interstate Stream Commission, to support key local implementation projects.

The Water Assembly advocates serious action now to start balancing water use with renewable supply. Much more attention and care must be given to this effort, or we face an extremely grave situation in the future.

In addition to the above funding priorities, we recommend the following:

- The Office of the State Engineer should declare all waters in the state to be eligible for regulation, including ground water below 2,500 feet and brackish waters.
- The state should negotiate an agreement with other Rio Grande Compact signatories to reduce storage at Elephant Butte to reduce evaporative losses.
- The Office of the State Engineer should require a sustainable supply of wet water for all subdivisions, with recognition of cumulative effects of neighborhood pumping.
- Change the Office of the State Engineer's assessment of sufficient water supply for subdivisions from advisory to mandatory.
- Make transfer criteria more robust, whether by legislation or regulation.
- The state should exclude water rights from condemnation through eminent domain.

The Water Assembly advocates serious action now to start balancing water use with renewable supply. The Water Assembly presently consists of a few dedicated volunteers and needs more citizens to help out. Water is very important in our region, and much more attention and care must be given to it, or we could face extremely negative situations in the future.

Please consider taking part. Our water resource is a fascinating subject, and you will have the satisfaction of directly ensuring that our region will have water for all uses for future generations.