

# V.B. Price: Preserving our water is greatest challenge the city, state faces

By [V.B. Price](#)

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This year feels like a momentous turning point in American history and in the history of Albuquerque, too — a time to rethink the future and prepare ourselves to capitalize on new opportunities and to avoid being swamped by complex, threatening problems.

New political leadership for the nation, a looming and nasty economic transition marked by stagflation after years of more or less steady prosperity, a turnover in most of New Mexico's Washington establishment, the beginnings of a radical makeover in our energy economy and paying the piper for past environmental indiscretions — all make this turning point into a potential laboratory for progress. For Albuquerque, and much of New Mexico, the challenges are truly monumental. Some are so unsettling that we don't want even to think about them.

It's entirely possible that Albuquerque and Santa Fe will have to deal realistically with the toxic aftermath of the Cold War, with radioactive and chemical wastes seeping into the water table and the Rio Grande from Los Alamos National Laboratory and into the aquifer under Sandia National Laboratories in south Albuquerque.

Clean drinking water remains Albuquerque's and Santa Fe's most important asset. Protecting it from the nuclear defense industry's toxic wastes could be among the deadliest and most complicated challenges we'll ever face. How do we clean up those waste dumps and other messes when it requires speedy and trustworthy negotiations among state, federal and municipal interests?

Without assurances that Rio Grande drinking water and aquifers are clean beyond reproach, not only will our collective health suffer, but the economies of Albuquerque and Santa Fe also will flatten out, decline and eventually tank.

Along with the post-Cold War hazardous-waste challenge come the slow, gnawing and confusing consequences of drought and global climate change. Every town and city in the West has to deal with these issues. Will they compete or cooperate with each other over water? Will we find collective answers to common problems, or will cities and states turn on each other, red in tooth and claw? Cooperative and innovative negotiation is the challenge. I hope we're up to it.

I wonder if we'll take every great snowpack, like we have this year, as an excuse to stop thinking about water and growth.

If some of our water goes bad and the drought continues with global warming, the other big challenges — creating sustainable, local food production to offset transportation costs and retrofitting sprawling cities into efficient, more beautiful and people-friendly places energized by public transit — might be impossible to meet.

The two great obstacles to innovation and discipline, which are basic to solve problems — are denial and lack of knowledge. The media in New Mexico, as The Tribune's motto has it, needs to throw more light on these issues, so we can find our way.