

# Commentary: Clear water policy

## New Mexico needs to create a strong program to protect our rivers

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### **Water watch**

This article is one in an occasional series Insight and Opinion is running on water issues affecting New Mexico. The articles are being written by members of the Middle Rio Grande Water Assembly ([waterassembly.org](http://waterassembly.org)). Each article represents the opinion of the author. Other articles in the series are available on The Tribune's Web site at [ABQTrib.com](http://ABQTrib.com).

### **Today's byline**

Harris is a Middle Rio Grande Water Assembly participant, an outfitter-guide and river policy advocate with Rio Grande Restoration in Embudo.

New Mexico's leaders and citizens know we have water problems. We really, really have a river problem.

Our state has not yet made the policy commitment that would maintain life in the running waters of the Rio Grande, Pecos, San Juan, Gila and Canadian rivers.

Citizens treasure these spiritual, aesthetic and environmental assets, yet the system encourages exploitation of water sources up to and beyond their natural limits. Attending to the legacy of flowing water is less a matter of legal administration or engineering control than of ecosystem management. Many of what are called river restoration projects involve bio-engineering - replacing invasive trees with natives or reshaping river channels. However, reconstructing a river's natural flow hydrology may be the essential factor to attend to if current and proposed vegetation and sediment management projects are to enjoy permanent success.

If these diverse projects could be crafted into a program, New Mexico might avoid squandering the natural capital long supplied by our rivers.

As water development imperatives channel and divert our rivers, we are losing the bedrock functions of rivers: the movement of water, sediment and energy; the maintenance of channels, banks and beds. These are vital foundations of an ecosystem of which human society is a part. In the last century and a half, we've drastically altered these.

New Mexicans do not want to become further alienated from their river heritage, and so there is a growing call for an effort to restore these lost, diminishing and very basic values people gain from rivers.

Restoration starts with river-flow regimes. Nonfunctioning channels that result in floods, the invasion of alien plant species and unnatural fires have arisen in large measure from past efforts at river control for flood protection and irrigation supplies.

Other jurisdictions in the West and worldwide have initiated programs that identify and provide natural timing, as well as magnitude and duration of flows, restoring processes with which river-dependent organisms have evolved.

Some of these "hydro-biological" objectives may be addressed simply by integrating identified ecosystem needs with existing water management objectives: such as changing the timing of reservoir releases and water deliveries, rehabilitating damaged watersheds, securing flood plains, improving management efficiency and conserving water in day-to-day uses.

Recently, river science has begun developing tools for determining flow prescriptions, which improve management in ways that enhance existing economies, while also meeting the ecological water needs of the stream. These models enable managers to mimic the most desirable pattern of flows, in harmony with existing water demands and year-to-year variations in supply.

Augmenting river flows is not a zero-sum game. In overworked streams, such as the Pecos and Rio Grande, water acquired to meet ecological management targets can also serve to help meet interstate compact and endangered species requirements, or vice-versa. There are synergies.

The inevitable risks and uncertainties of establishing such a system require investment in water but also in involving water-rights holders and scientists in design, monitoring and adaptive management of rivers, if we intend to continue to enjoy nature's gift of rivers.

New Mexico has been blessed many well-conceived projects and funding for more, witnessed by the governor's recent call for a \$7.5 million river restoration fund. It also has a potential water acquisition tool in the Strategic Water Reserve, which gives the Interstate Stream Commission authority and funding to lease or purchase water on over appropriated rivers.

New Mexico's declared "Year of Water" is an opportunity to develop a clear river restoration policy. Given such a policy, the political will and resources to implement it, New Mexico can achieve what some have believed impossible: healthier river ecosystems and a more reliable water balance for human uses.