

THE FUTURE OF RECREATION IN NEW MEXICO

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No one can live in New Mexico for very long before discovering that there is not enough water to satisfy everyone's need for water-based recreation. As all the speakers have indicated today, recreation is not the only user. In fact, I would guess that if you asked most recreational water users what single thing was wrong with New Mexico water recreation, you'd get the following response: "Too many people who are trying to use too little accessible water."

Over half of all our state's outdoor recreation is water oriented. As you know, New Mexico's population has increased by 27 percent in the last ten years. Leisure time is on the increase. Outdoor recreation in New Mexico has been growing and will keep on growing.

In New Mexico, several kinds of outdoor recreation become severely constrained when water becomes unavailable for recreation. The quality of fishing, boating, swimming, water-fowl hunting, and other water-based recreation uses is reduced without enough water available.

I'm not going to suggest that New Mexico would be necessarily better off by making "more water available for recreation," because I don't believe that it is necessarily so. As you no doubt know, providing more water for recreation, with a fixed supply, often means taking it away from other uses. Agricultural, municipal, and industrial users all need water, too. It is my belief that the question of how New Mexico's water should be used in the future cannot be answered by finding out which use

"needs" the water most. All water users in New Mexico "need" more water. All water users in New Mexico would likely benefit if there were more water to spread around. The state's income and employment would grow as a result. Unfortunately, wishing for more low-cost water to spread around New Mexico, as you well know, will not get it here, and that is not likely to change.

Our water law recognizes that there is not enough water to go around for all beneficial uses, and as a result, it treats the use of a water as a property right. These rights can be bought and sold in the marketplace. In providing for the exchange of water rights in the marketplace, our state's water law has conferred an immense benefit on our state's people. If, for example, an acre foot of water has a higher beneficial use in producing coal than in agriculture, our water law allows the transfer of that right, through the market process, to the higher beneficial use, subject, of course, to approval by the State Engineer. By allowing for the buying and selling of water rights in the market, our water law helps to bring what precious and costly water supplies we have to their highest beneficial and, presumably, to their highest economic-valued use for our state. However, for agricultural, industrial, and municipal uses, the economic benefits of water to the people of New Mexico is determined mostly in the market through the purchase and sale of water rights.

However, the economic value of water to the state when used for recreation, is an altogether different story. The recreational water user, and hence the state of New Mexico, receives a benefit from the

water use as it does from agricultural, municipal, and industrial users. Unfortunately, our water markets do not tell us what the recreational value of water is. The recreational water user spends money that gets spread around New Mexico communities, and those communities near recreational water sources, such as Truth or Consequences, benefit too. The monetary value to New Mexico of water used for recreation has been increasing steadily and will continue to do so, as more people move here, and people find themselves with more leisure time. This trend will not likely reverse itself, however, regardless of what that increasing value of water in recreation might be. Nobody, to my knowledge, has a very precise estimate of what this recreational value of water is. As I said a few minutes ago, I do not believe that the key to the best water allocation in New Mexico's future necessarily lies in making more water available to recreation, although it might. But we certainly do need one thing: decision makers need to know what water will be worth in recreation, so that its value can be contrasted with values in agriculture, industry, and municipal.

Based on some interpretations there is nothing in New Mexico water law or in engineering principles which would prohibit the acquiring of water rights for recreation. As you are probably aware, we have set aside some minimum pools for recreation at Elephant Butte. When and if we should reserve more water for recreation in the future is more a question of economic worth. I would guess that our State Engineer's Office and other agencies would be more prepared than they are now to recommend committing public resources for water-based recreation, if we knew what the water was worth when set aside specifically for that use.

People need water for recreation. But just saying that water is nice to have for fishing, swimming, hunting, and boating, is not good enough. Reserving water for those uses often means retiring it from or delaying its use for other valuable purposes. Most of you probably would not support spending public resources in order to buy recreational water rights in the future unless you thought that the purchase was worth the price.

The only way we can find the value of water allocated to recreation, as compared to its value in other uses, is through scientific research. We currently have far too little good information on that subject to be of much use to decision makers.

We must not only devote research effort to quantifying the current economic value of water in recreation, but we must look to the future. Many recreation management choices which we can make today will affect the future recreational benefits of water. We can change access to sites, construct additional impoundments, change release patterns from existing impoundments, and change diversion patterns. We can ration the use of facilities in order to reduce congestion. All these ways of managing water will affect the future benefits of that water for New Mexico. Only with more research resources devoted to that cause, can we more effectively plan for New Mexico's water future.

In summary, as I see it, a fundamental problem regarding the recreational use of water, a problem which we can address through proper planning, is this:

Recreation is but one of the many competing uses of water in New Mexico, each of which contributes to the economic prosperity of the state. With future probable population migration and economic growth coming to New Mexico, the demands for water, especially in recreation, will be rising. In order to bring the greatest economic prosperity to New Mexico, arising from water use, we must first know what water is going to be worth in these end uses. Water markets will give us very few clues to the value of water in recreation. The state of New Mexico needs this knowledge to be obtained through scientific research before well-informed choices can be made.