THE NECESSITY FOR WATER PLANNING

Tom G. Bahr
Secretary
New Mexico Energy, Minerals and Natural
Resources Department
408 Galisteo
Villagra Building - Room 121
Santa Fe, New Mexico 87503

Dr. Tom Bahr, Secretary of the Energy, Minerals and Natural Resources Department, and Director of the New Mexico Water Resources Research Institute spoke on behalf of Governor Garrey Carruthers, who was ill and unable to speak at the conference. The following comments have been transcribed and edited.

The governor is sorry he can't be here. I'm also sorry he can't make it, and I'm sure you are as well. He was going to share with you some of his thoughts on water planning. What I am going to say here is pretty much shared by the governor. As you well know, Garrey Carruthers was the director of the Water Resources Research Institute, and has been intimately involved in these conferences for many years. So what I am about to say reflects his thoughts as they have evolved for at least the last decade.

We know that New Mexico is an arid state with a significantly growing urban population. In parts of this state, we are going to have water demands that exceed water supplies by the turn of the century. This is a localized problem, but it is common to see this imbalance crop up across the state. I think it really defines many of the problems we have with water resources in the state. We have a little more than a million acre-feet of surface water that is available for beneficial use and this is, for all practical purposes, fully appropriated. In the coming decades it is unlikely that New Mexico is going to obtain any new surface water supplies. Importation schemes are economically very difficult and politically almost impossible. I have talked to you about this before, and you have heard this from many, many people. Demand will probably be met by transferring existing water uses from one use to another. This will take place predominantly through market transfers from the agricultural sector into municipal and industrial uses. This is already happening.

Unless you have been locked in the closet for the last eight years, you know that water supplies in the state of New Mexico are threatened by out-of-state demands. State law in New Mexico allows New Mexico ground water to be transported to another state. On the other hand, the good news is that our law can restrict the transport of out-of-state use if that transport is contrary to conservation or contrary to the public welfare of the state. Until there is resolution of these and other related issues and further definition of what the law means, the amount of water we have in the state that can be put to use, and the jurisdiction over that water, are going to remain uncertain. That uncertainty hinders any kind of comprehensive planning.

Let me add another element. When I talked with the governor yesterday, I asked him if there was anything he wanted me to stress. He said, "Yes, there is. Stress water quality." That is the other factor that needs to be incorporated into water planning. Ninety percent of the population in New Mexico is served by ground water supply systems. In the rural areas, it is about 97 percent. Since records were kept in the 1920s, at least 80 public ground water supply systems in the state have been contaminated. Now as a practical matter, once that contamination has taken place, it is difficult if not impossible economically to clean it up. Once the damage is done, you can almost forget about it. That water supply is lost just as if it were exported to the city of El Paso, or Tucson, or to Amarillo. It is contaminated and gone. A water quality problem then turns into a water supply problem. Water quality must be incorporated into the water planning process. I cannot stress that enough.

Along this line, the Environmental Improvement Division has given a lot of thought on how to

incorporate water quality into the planning process. The Environmental Improvement Division is considering a grant program for local and regional water planning. The grants will help fill in knowledge gaps on such things as local land use, and will look at the geohydrological parameters that are going to relate to the vulnerability of some of these aquifers to contamination. There is a lot to be learned in this area, and it has to be incorporated into the water planning process. I think you could view this as a parallel to a regional water planning effort currently being administered by the Interstate Stream Commission. This new program at the Environmental Improvement Division is evolving and will need legislative approval. Keep your eyes on it. I think it is a very significant happening and something that needs to be done.