

REGIONAL WATER PLANNING IN NEW MEXICO

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How do we plan for the water future of New Mexico? How do communities plan for the future? How do we assure that communities have the water necessary for their growth and development in the future? Many communities in New Mexico are hard pressed for their present water supplies and do not have the answers to questions of what water supplies they have, what water supplies they will need for their future growth and development, and more importantly, where they will find that water.

If we look to the southeast corner of the state, we find many communities facing an uncertain water future. Some of their water supplies have been contaminated by oil and gas operations. Many of the communities are small and dispersed and are going to need to find some mechanism for working together to acquire common water sources and distribution systems.

If we move farther north on the eastern side, in the Union, Harding, Quay, Guadalupe, Curry, Roosevelt County area, we find communities facing increasing needs for water, facing out-of-state demand, and facing the need to band together to meet their water future needs.

If we move to our western border with Arizona, in the McKinley County area, we find those communities with practically no surface water supplies and limited ground water supplies.

We also have a complex mix of jurisdictions with state lands, federal lands, Indian lands, and private lands. How does Gallup provide for its future? How can it provide a secure water supply for its future growth and development?

If we move south down that New Mexico-Arizona border area to the Grant County region, we again find limited water supplies available. In some areas in the region, water cannot be used outside the house for such things as gardens and lawns.

Many communities are hard pressed, and as if that were not enough, the courts have raised the prospect of out-of-state demand. We had thought that "our" water was "our" water, and that we could plan for our water futures based upon water available within the state borders.

The courts in the Sporhase case have largely erased state borders. There are exceptions, but nonetheless, the language of the courts is extremely narrow. We once thought that the laws of man, that is, laws of the state of New Mexico would protect us at the state boundary, but the courts have largely told us that now the laws of man will not protect us.

Then, if the laws of man will not protect us, surely the laws of economics will protect us from out-of-state demand. We had thought that it was just too expensive for surrounding communities in surrounding states to reach into New Mexico, develop water and transport it out-of-state. But, economic studies now tell us that we cannot take much solace in the laws of economics either. Economic studies tell us that it is economical for water to be acquired in New Mexico and transported through pipelines to surrounding states.

With the prospect of increasing demand, both in-state and out-of-state, how do we as the state of New Mexico help communities secure their water for their future needs? To help answer these questions, the legislature in House Bill 337 in 1987, inaugurated something new for New Mexico. It started regional water planning. This plan basically authorizes the Interstate Stream Commission to make grants to communities to do their own water planning, to do their own water studies, to hire the specialists to determine how much economic growth they are likely to have, and to project what their population growth is likely to be. With those

estimates in hand, they will determine what water will be needed and where they can obtain it.

The New Mexico water plan could be characterized by two key phrases or key concepts. One is "bottom up" and the other is "partnership." The New Mexico plan, unlike those found in some states, is not a state dictated plan, where the state plans for the community from the top down in a centralized fashion. Rather it is a bottom up plan, in which communities themselves are provided the wherewithal to band together in regions to determine what their water needs will be for the future.

Therefore, that brings in the second concept of partnership. State funds are used to allow communities to do their water planning. So we have a partnership between the state and the local communities using a bottom up concept. As a result of that 1987 appropriation of only \$150,000, the program was begun with water plans being initiated in the eastern plains region of Union, Harding, Quay, Guadalupe, Curry, DeBaca, Roosevelt and eastern San Miguel counties. The San Juan Water Commission also has their study underway as does the Santa Fe Metropolitan Water Board.

In 1988, the legislature provided \$250,000 to continue the program. The good news was that \$250,000 was provided by the legislature. The bad news was that the response for that funding exceeded \$1.6 million. The Interstate Stream Commission held hearings in September and considered these proposals from every corner of the state, and faced hard decisions in selecting regional water plans to fund. We now have regional water planning in the beginning stages in the southwest council of government area: Catron, Grant, Hidalgo, and Luna counties, the southeastern New Mexico area, the Gallup area, the north central New Mexico economic development area centered in Taos county, and the Mora-San Miguel Water Plan. So we are underway.

There is much more to be done. There are many areas still to be funded and more money will be sought from the upcoming legislature to extend the effort. Regional water planning in New Mexico is underway. Regional water planning in New Mexico is alive and well.

Some might ask "Is this going to be just another report that will gather dust on the shelf?" And that certainly is a possibility, but it is an unlikely reality. City commissioners, county commissioners, mayors, and public works directors around the state are now constantly being faced with the necessity of making decisions about their communities future. What economic development are we going to have?

What economic development can we have? Are we going to have sufficient water to encourage that new industry to settle in our community and provide jobs for our children? How do we provide for the population we already have? Those decisions are a matter of everyday decision-making in this state. With these water plans available, with the information, and with the data that they contain, communities around the state of New Mexico will not have to deal in the dark, but will be able to plan for their futures with greater knowledge, certainty, and security.