

## WATER CHALLENGES ON THE LOWER RIO GRANDE

New Mexico First's Recommendations and the State Engineer-ISC Legislative Agenda for 1999

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implementation team to carry the recommendations forward to all parts of the state.

New Mexico First held a town hall in June 1997 called, "Managing New Mexico's Land and Water Resources for the Best Use: Now and Through 2020." About 130 people attended it and probably one-third were water experts, like the people who are in this room, and the rest of the people there were not—they were community leaders from all over the state. These 130 people studied a very fine background report prepared by Tom Bahr at the Water Resources Research Institute, immersed themselves in the subject, and met for a very intense three days. A consensus emerged from a very well informed segment of the body politic. One of the principal consensus recommendations was this:

The Town Hall overwhelmingly recommends additional funding for the State Engineer... The Town Hall strongly recommends that the State Engineer be given sufficient money to implement a comprehensive water inventory, adjudication, and administration system, including geographic information systems and a publicly accessible database.

It is worth mentioning that the second town hall, in 1988, ten years before, had almost the same recommendation.

Today I am here to talk to you as a member of that Town Hall and the implementation team that came from it. As things are now, when a firm starts a project for a client it spends many, many hours searching the State Engineer records. With all due respect, some records are disorganized, hard to find,

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I am going to talk about New Mexico First's recommendations relative to the State Engineer and the Interstate Stream Commission (ISC). I think by the time I am through you will realize that you have heard it all before and you agree with me.

New Mexico First was founded by our two U.S. Senators about 12 years ago to give New Mexico citizens an opportunity to become well informed and to take leadership roles in deciding the course of legislation in the state. Each year New Mexico First conducts two town halls, each one on an issue important to the people. The idea is to have a truly informed discussion to build leadership about it and to develop a consensus about it, and then organize an

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and difficult to understand. It is hard to know when you have seen all the records that you need to see because you do not know where the rest of them are. This situation is very good for consultants because we get paid by the hour, but it is not very good for New Mexico. The worst part of it is that when a State Engineer staff member starts a project, he or she has to go through the same process. It has been estimated that somewhere between 40 and 70 percent of professional staff time is devoted to this labor of data gathering. The body of water-rights records has been accumulating since before statehood—it has more than 100 years of records. This body of records is approximately three million documents. It is being added to very rapidly, as you can imagine, with paper records, maps and computer files, but files that do not talk to each other.

You have already heard in yesterday's presentations that if New Mexico is going to hold its own in contention over water with other areas, this situation needs to change. We need to show that we can

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There was a lot

of discussion yesterday about New Mexico's relationship with the federal government relative to water. I think we at least understand that if we are to be taken seriously and not have our water managed for us, we need to be in a position ourselves to administer our water effectively and efficiently.

Two other inevitable pressures that require us to do this are drought and growth. We are going to have another drought. We are going to have another drought that will be worse than the drought of the 1950s. We already have seen how much difficulty the State Engineer has in keeping up with the movements of water required by the growth we have been experiencing. Right now the State Engineer administers water and he acts as a referee to see that transfers are done according to the rules, but inevitably I think he is going to have to manage water to be sure that we neither over-deliver nor under-deliver under our compact obligations. This also will require that water rights information be organized into a single, comprehensive, easily accessible database.

I think we should expect the State Engineer and the ISC to have the kind of quick and unerring access to water rights information that we expect from our bank when we ask about our account, or we expect from our travel agent when we talk about airline reservations. Putting all this information into the database, which has already started of course and goes by the acronym WATERS, is not something the State Engineer's staff is going to be able to do in their spare time. They do not have any spare time and they have difficulty staying up with the flow of applications as it is. There is a backlog of 2,000-2,500 protested applications as we speak.

There are lots of additions to the State Engineer's staff, lots of equipment, lots of budget items that need to be taken into account in the next legislative session. Most important, I think, is the automation of water rights records. In addition to some new engineering positions and some new equipment, the State Engineer and ISC have asked for 49 new positions which will be temporary in the sense that they will sunset when the job of abstracting the water rights has been completed. This will take some money. The requested addition to the budget is approximately \$6 million, more than 60 percent of the FY 1999 budget, but I think, having watched the Office of the State Engineer myself for 25 years, that it is not asking for a bit too much.

New Mexico First and my fellow citizens and members of the 1997 water Town Hall urge you to help with this enterprise and try to get the Legislature involved as much as we can and tell them how serious this problem is. Thank you very much.