

PUBLIC RECOGNITION OF NEW MEXICO'S WATER PROBLEMS

The County Government's Point of View

E. G. Minton, Jr.*

The United States with it's vast resources, multiple organizations for the improvement of it's citizens way of life, cannot be matched by any other country in the world. Regardless of the fact that Russia has beat us to a Sputnik, and the second satellite with it's husky dog passenger, we in America are the most fortunate race of people on earth today. The United States has always put the welfare of the American people first, and by doing so, have made tremendous strides in disease control, soil and water conservation, improvement, development, and control of crop blight for increased farm production. Made possible electricity and telephones to the rural dweller. Federal Aid highways as well as thousands of other ways to improve our every day lives including rural and small communities water systems.

The various states, in a smaller way, have followed in the footsteps of the Federal Government to try to make our living standards better. In every way, the emphasis has been on the human being, rather than on war machines for the destruction of the world and it's inhabitants. In New Mexico, the various state agencies have made tremendous strides in assisting local governments in alleviating problems or conserving our resources. The state highways are being improved continuously, our State College is making studies here and all over the State for the betterment of crop yields, improving of livestock breeds, making sheep produce more wool, making economic studies in the pumping of water, and probably most important, producing a top grade of future citizens.

The various cities, towns and communities are continuously making appeals to it's State or Federal governments for assistance of every type. Most of these appeals can be approved, some cannot. The State and Federal governments must therefore, maintain clearing houses, so to speak, staffed with experts in every field, for the purpose of studying these requests and appeals. If the request is found to be logical, probably some way is found to execute the request, if the request is found to be unscund or feasibly uneconomic, then it is denied.

As uncommon and rare as it may be, there are times when a county or community is determined to develop it's own ideas without the assistance of either the Federal or State government. It may have developed an attitude of keeping home business at home, or it may feel that under certain specific conditions, it is able to solve the various problems which arise within it's borders. Such a feeling arose in Lea County. Perhaps, it was because Lea County is fortunate to be rich in oil, and fast becoming rich in potash, that

*Director, Lea County Water Recharge Division, Lovington, New Mexico

it is financially able to handle many of the County's problems without outside aid. At any rate, Lea County is doing just that in regards to the problem of declining ground water.

Following the publication of the results of the U. S. Geological Survey and the State Engineer of New Mexico, regarding the inventory of available water in Lea County, with the probable life of available water, the people of Lea County became considerably concerned, and eventually evolved the idea of financing research and experiments in the possibility of increasing the small annual recharge, to lengthen the maximum life of it's water basin. The reason for a "keep at home" decision probably rested on the following facts, in addition to the fact that Lea County could finance any research necessary.

1. The County felt that it should be entitled to control and govern any program of improving it's natural resources.
2. The County felt that since the water was the basis for all the economy within it's boundaries, that it was too important an issue to postpone for an indefinite period of time in awaiting outside aid.
3. The County felt that the water problem within it's borders was of a community nature, and as a community, it would take immediate efforts to solve them.
4. The County realizing that it's water problem was of a community nature, that any improvement spelled investment, that by investment there was hope for a return.

Lea Countians are interested in the future of Lea County. Coupled with this as has been stated is the fact that Lea County is in position to invest in it's economy, and are more fortunate than other counties of New Mexico in this respect.

For the past year and a half we in Lea County have been carrying on a program of research and experiment, in the field of the feasibility, both economically and engineering wise, of artificially recharging the underground water basin. This program has been intensive, and concrete. Every endeavor has been made to concentrate the study into as short a time as possible. It is not complete. There remains considerable research and experiments. We feel a sense of pressure, knowing that our underground water basin, without some adjustment will arrive at a point where so many other ground water areas are today, overdevelopment with abandonment of valuable irrigated lands and abandonment of industry. We know we are overdeveloped in some areas. We know our natural recharge is small, probably less than present commitments show. We know that time will place our economy in jeopardy, for all of our economy is based on a secure future of water supply. We feel that any sound investment will be returned many fold. We realize fully, and with concern

towards the future, that something must be done. Artificial recharge may not be the complete answer, but we feel that it is important enough to make a complete engineering and hydrologic study.

The returns on investment from a water recharge operation in Lea County can be very attractive. It may provide an excellent opportunity to provide an inheritance to one's heirs. The use of recharged water will generate income in the future that would not have otherwise been possible. The fact that tangible additions are being made to the water inventory of our county will result in intrinsic values such as our people being able to plan further into the future, create interest in community affairs, and attract industry and investments to the County that might otherwise be discouraged. For these reasons the people of Lea County have a vital interest in water. We have high hopes, and this is an important feeling for any group, as they are able to plan, not for a short generation of time, but into an indefinite period.

Our plans in Lea County are not simple. The overall program will be an expensive one. We mean to continue to study and to plan. We want to be sure that there will be ample return on our investment. We feel that the recharge program will be feasible. At the present time we are in the process of organizing a Lea County Conservancy District for the primary purpose of artificial recharge. We feel that the existence of a Conservancy District will more than pay for it's self through it's functions, not only of recharge but also in the field of flood protection and the prevention of inundation to our agricultural lands, our towns and cities. There are many factors which enter into the existence of such an organization. Relevant cost and income factors must be considered. The proper costs to charge against a ground water recharge well in order to determine the feasibility of recharging, additional operating and maintenance cost required to keep the well in operation during it's lifetime, and the average life of a recharge well, must be considered. Experience with recharge wells is not sufficient to establish long--time records of maintenance figures. Monetary evaluations have not been made of the many benefits such as a reduction of damages to highways, lessened health hazards, possible use of the lake beds for production of grasses, and etc. However, it is almost certain that when these monetary evaluations and engineering studies are completed we will find a justification for a Conservancy District, as the income values will more than offset the maintenance cost with considerable to spare. I do not intend to go into these today, but merely to touch them lightly in order that you may get a more accurate idea why my county feels it's responsibility in curing the ills of it's water resources.

It is the hope of Lea County that through the activity of it's Conservancy District, there will be a successful halt to the declining water levels. We hope that in a few short years we will have made our towns and cities much safer from floods and inundation. We want our people to have a more secured feeling with a more secure water supply. We want industry and agriculture to come to Lea County. We want industry and agriculture to know that we can provide what they require.