

## REGIONAL WATER PLANNING IN THE EASTERN PLAINS REGION

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The Interstate Stream Commission's (ISC) Regional Water Planning Program addresses the critical need for a water resources planning and development process in New Mexico. The program is a "bottom up" approach and includes public participation by local "stake holders." In the Eastern Plains area, that includes eight county commissions, 22 incorporated municipalities, dozens of unincorporated communities, a major defense installation, eleven acequias, several mutual domestic water associations, one major private water utility, a conservancy district, an irrigation district, eight soil and water conservation districts and nearly 85,000 residents.

We recognize that without the new regional water planning authorities, a state water plan would likely be well-conceived, but might not have the necessary local support to make implementation possible. This is where the very positive benefit of regional water planning occurs. The law requires a voluntary agreement based on hydrological and political interests in common.

The law also requires public access and participation. The education of the public will have considerable benefits as we seek consensus on solutions to regional and local water problems based on a clear understanding of the problems, issues and opportunities.

The unique aspects of our regional water planning effort include:

1. The eastern region is a large geographic area: 18,500 square miles in three drainage basins in eight counties. The area has two rivers, four major reservoirs, five declared water basins, and a declining ground water situation in the Ogallala and related aquifers.
2. Having seen some of the contract work performed under other funded ISC water planning grants, I am aware that our effort was the first to attempt to do the work in-house. We are fortunate to have the assistance of

Orlando Pacheco, a civil engineer with more than 20 years of water planning experience.

3. We are utilizing a steering committee, the Eastern Plains Council of Governments board, the Resource Conservation and Development Area Council board, and local governments in the planning process.
4. Community and county level public hearings based on local interest and support will be held. At least four public hearings, and possibly ten, will be scheduled.

There is a growing awareness of the strategic importance of water in the growth and development of New Mexico. Entities within the eastern region have been working cooperatively for more than five years to address common water issues and problems. Our collective responsibility to address water problems is compounded by the great diversity of situations and needs in our region. We also recognize the complex legal and regulatory framework in which we operate.

I will outline some of our biggest problems and some possible solutions. Our draft recommendations are designed to optimize the use of available water resources and extend the life of the aquifer to meet current and projected water needs of the region.

Some of the water problems in our region are beyond the control of local authorities. The Guadalupe/DeBaca county area provides an example. The Pecos River in this area has multiple problems: 1) shortages based on lack of rainfall (yield); 2) water quality problems, primarily salinity from natural causes; and 3) legal problems, specifically, the impact of court decisions on how to meet the Pecos water debt to Texas.

Court decisions could have a very detrimental impact on agriculture and the overall economy of this part of the region. The water quality problems would be very expensive to correct. Fortunately,

some of the other problems can be addressed locally or in partnership with the state.

Our single most pressing long-term problem is providing an adequate supply of water for municipal and industrial purposes in most of Quay, Curry and Roosevelt counties. Everyone knows that we are mining our ground water in the area. The sobering fact: the eventual exhaustion of the Ogallala aquifer is inescapable. It is not a matter of if, it is a matter of when. Based on available information and studies, assuming no major changes in current agricultural practices or technology, the sole-source aquifers in most of the area will be virtually gone by 2020. This will result in a reversion to dryland farming for the most part, and it will have significant economic consequences. Our plan addresses this inevitable problem and discusses ways to mitigate its impact.

The Ute Water Development Plan is the centerpiece of our Regional Water Plan. It involves the construction of a major pipeline, pumping plant, and regional water treatment facility utilizing 18,400 acre-feet of water. The project would deliver treated water for municipal and industrial purposes to nine communities and Cannon Air Force Base, which has 70 percent of the region's population.

The primary leadership for this project is the Ute Water Commission, the joint powers agreement entity established to plan and develop this project. The commission has received considerable support and encouragement from many groups including the ISC, the state engineer and his office staff, the Bureau of Reclamation, Senators Pete Domenici and Jeff Bingaman, and the private water utility serving Clovis, the New Mexico American Water Company.

The history of this project dates back to the decision by the legislature in the early 1960s to invest state funds in the construction of Ute Reservoir. The project impounds water consistent with the provisions of the Canadian River Compact. For nearly 15 years, as many as 14 cities worked together to deliver water as far south as Jal. However, the original plan had fatal flaws.

The new "abbreviated" project is clearly feasible. The preliminary appraisal level cost estimate indicates that communities will pay about \$2.50 per thousand gallons to deliver treated water. This is an increase over what most are now paying, but affordable as a long-term solution.

We don't want to plan this project to death again. We plan to make it happen. The Bureau of Reclamation has received a special appropriation to complete more detailed cost estimates and detailed engineering on the Ute Pipeline Project.

We need to thank Cliff Barrett and the Bureau of Reclamation staff for the partnership approach they are taking on this and other efforts important to New Mexico. We have found the Bureau staff in Salt Lake City and the staff of Albuquerque to be very receptive and responsive to local consensus and interests on the Ute Project.

The project will require creative financing from a number of sources. Privatization of the operation and maintenance of the system is being seriously considered. The use of wind power for pumping the water is also being evaluated. This could turn a major problem into an asset contributing greatly to our efforts at economic diversification.

Aside from the Ute Project, our regional plan considers other issues, problems and needs. With help from local communities in our area, we are making a deliberate effort to upgrade all the municipal water systems in the region. This will require better capital improvements planning at the state and local level, and a greater emphasis on improved operations and maintenance.

We are working closely with the Infrastructure Development Assistance Program at the University of New Mexico to provide training opportunities in this area. The impact of the new Safe Water Drinking Act standards are of concern to us. We are also suggesting that each community establish a 40-year plan to help assure an adequate supply.

Local governments are being encouraged, individually and collectively as a region, to establish locally controlled and managed water conservation strategies. Locally controlled conservation is essential if we are to be effective stewards of our limited water resources.

Although regional water planning law and regulations do not specifically require it, we feel that any regional water plan would be incomplete without a water preservation strategy. Water quality is considered a high priority, not because we have extensive water quality problems, but because we recognize that prevention of water contamination is much more economical than cleanup of polluted water. We currently have an Environmental Protection Agency Superfund site at Santa Fe Lake near Clovis and the remediation costs will be expensive.

A side benefit of our water planning activities has been our participation in other activities like the Governor's Water Quality Advisory Committee. The final report to the governor is now being completed, and we hope it will bring about serious discussion in the legislature, elevating this issue on the state's public policy agenda. It is very apparent

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that local governments and local soil and water conservation districts must exercise, to a greater extent, their authority under existing laws. County governments in particular must increase the use of subdivision regulations to protect water quality, particularly in vulnerable areas.

Without local communities taking interest and responsibility in their water future, I foresee a state enforcement alternative. This could be combative, divisive and ultimately unproductive. A cooperative partnership seeking compliance would be preferable.

Another activity which has contributed greatly to a broader understanding of our water problems was the Second New Mexico Town Hall meeting in Angel Fire this past summer. Important recommendations were made and have been published. I hope you all get a copy and review it carefully.

There is much more to be done in our water planning region and throughout the state. The limited funding for regional water planning provides a mechanism for local participation and leadership. It is crucial that these efforts continue. Our problems and needs are diverse while our agencies and institutions are fragmented. We appreciate the opportunity to work with all of the organizations now in place. Their work is vital. Our participation on an informed basis is even more critical. We hope our regional water plan makes a positive contribution to these efforts.