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REGIONAL WATER PLANNING DIALOGUE: THE PECOS EXPERIENCE

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In 1983, when Federal District Court Judge Bratton found New Mexico's prohibition on water exports unconstitutional, he taught New Mexicans that we're going to have to do our homework if we want to keep our water. Judge Bratton told us, in effect, that to keep water in New Mexico when water-short neighbors want it, we will have to show that we need the water, that we have plans for the water, and that the water is crucial to the welfare of the people of the state of New Mexico. Judge Bratton will probably go down in history as the man who made the "P word" (which is what they call planning in Colorado) popular in New Mexico.

Suddenly, the way local communities used their water became a state problem. In 1985, the New Mexico Legislature gave the Interstate Stream Commission (ISC) instructions to fund regional water planning efforts in the state. This unique legislation did not explain what a water region was, or what a water plan was. Instead, it appropriated money for regional water planning and left the regions and the ISC to figure out what that was. The ISC and 23 regions of the state figured it out, and the ISC funded those 23 regions, some of which have completed their plans, some of which are nearly finished, while some are still in the early stages.

This regional water planning process has certainly broken new ground in New Mexico, where planning is not a household word. The regional planners decided what a plan was as they went along, doing something that had never been done before. On the local level, we saw a bottom-up process emerge in many regions, with grass-roots people showing great creativity, enthusiasm and concern about local water problems and opportunities. Questions of the deepest significance are being addressed in these local water plans. On the state level, we have a new state engineer with a new approach to state water policy. Eluid Martinez has brought with him a new openness to local/state partnership in making water policy. Again, questions of the deepest significance are being addressed at the state level—public welfare, conservation, instream flows, preservation of agriculture and traditional culture. This is an exciting time of change and evolution with regard to New Mexico water issues.

In spite of all this activity, there is relatively little awareness of water policy issues at the level of the general New Mexican public. While there is rich local activity at the bottom, grass-roots level, and an atmosphere of responsibility and change at the top, the water administration of the state, there isn't much happening in the middle. There is very little state-wide communication among regional planners and the gener-

al public. What we have is a kind of a sandwich with no filling. It's hard to get a sandwich like that to stick together.

That sandwich didn't stick together on Tuesday, November 3, when New Mexico voters failed to approve the sale of bonds for the purchase and retirement of water rights on the Pecos. Most New Mexico voters didn't know that the water obligation to Texas had anything to do with them. In other areas as well, regional water planners are having difficulty seeing how to go about implementing their policy, because the state-wide integration of these regional policies—the filling—is missing. To provide that filling, we need a cross-regional exchange of information and a forum for setting New Mexico priorities that express the regional priorities of the water plans. This part of the process has been missing.

We felt the regional planning process offered an opportunity to bring regional water planners together in a way that would really contribute to the water planning environment of New Mexico, help to provide the missing center, the filling to the sandwich. The Natural Resources Center sponsored the Upper Rio Grande Working Group and the Wilderness Conference to bring New Mexicans together to talk about resource-management priorities. Western Network's mission—to resolve conflict in the public policy arena by helping people arrive at decisions that meet their needs—has resulted in a body of work in alternative dispute resolution, public involvement, and cross-cultural communication, as well as a research program which has produced a valuable series of sourcebooks and guides for water policy decision makers. The Natural Resources Center and Western Network are both organizations with experience in bringing people together to exchange information and set priorities. The regional water planning legislation itself has its origins in a study on state appropriation of unappropriated groundwater carried out by the Water Resources Research Institute and the Natural Resources Center associates.

We began by talking to people involved in regional water planning in the Pecos basin, because some problems on the Pecos are well-defined and acute. Three regional water plans touch the Pecos basin: the Mora/San Miguel plan, the Eastern Plains Council of Governments plan and the Lower Pecos plan. The story of these discussions and the roundtable at Las Vegas that came out of them is told in a handout available from Western Network. A document on the planning experience of these three regions and the proceedings of the roundtable is also available at the cost of reproduction. You're welcome to look at these, and we

invite you to talk to the many people here who were involved in that process. You will probably get quite a different story from each.

I won't tell my version of that story now, because I would like to use the time allotted here to ask two of the people who were at the roundtable to share with you their experience with their region's water plans, and what they see as the challenges faced by regional water planning today, as well as how they would like to see their work implemented. These two men—Antonio Medina, from the Mora Water and Land Protective Association, and Lee Tillman, the Executive Director of the Eastern Plains Council of Governments—demonstrate that expertise and creative energy in water planning and community empowerment in New Mexico is thriving at the grassroots level.