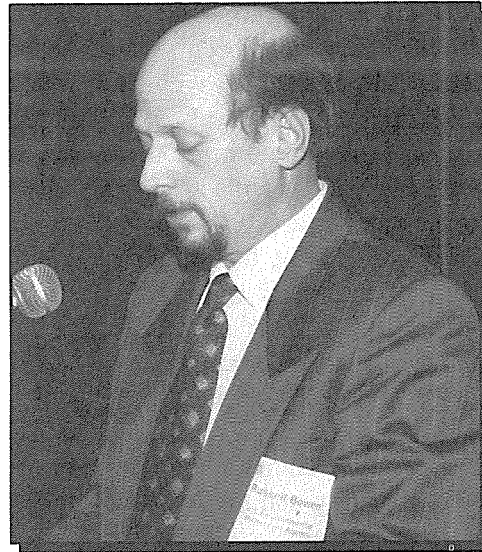


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FEDERAL INITIATIVES ON THE RIO GRANDE

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Good afternoon and thank you for inviting the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to attend and participate in the annual New Mexico water conference. For years I have read the conference proceedings with much interest and it is great to be here in person.

I want to talk about ecosystem protection. Ecosystem protection is at the core of EPA's reorientation goal of moving the agency toward a more holistic approach to environmental protection. Currently, a multitude of terms are being used to describe the new orientation. There is the watershed protection approach, whole basin planning, ecoregion protection, geographic focused approach, ecosystem management and place-based protection. Other federal agencies also have their own terms. What do they all have in common? In

my opinion, their common theme is to bring us back to focusing on natural resources as a system and not separate components. In the past we have chosen to focus on certain components because of the agency's organizational structure or specific programmatic goals.

The Office of Water's approach to ecosystem protection is being called the watershed approach. We will attempt to deliver the services we are responsible for, in a manner that recognizes and respects the complexity and interrelationships within ecosystems.

Since the early seventies, significant progress has been made by targeting specific point sources of pollution. In the nineties, we have begun to focus on nonpoint sources of pollution. It was good public policy and environmental man-

agement to target these sources. However, during the last few years, resource-driven programs, many initiated by local concerns and others by national attention, have also been supported by EPA programs. Our experience with these resource-based efforts has taught us that we need to improve our programs to make them work better for states and local people who are pursuing a geographic focused approach.

EPA's vision for the watershed protection approach is clean water and healthy, sustainable ecosystems as a result of comprehensive yet tailored water resources management everywhere. We will know we have achieved our vision when our work is driven by environmental objectives rather than programmatic requirements. This means coordinating and tailoring the services we provide to meet the needs of the ecosystems. We view ecosystems as the interactions of complex, dynamic communities, that include people with their physical surroundings. We believe healthy ecosystems provide for the health and welfare of humans as well as other living things.

We believe we can achieve our vision over time by working together, by increasingly integrating environmental measurements, by aligning our priorities and by coordinating our actions. We believe we can do this while maintaining the important environmental improvements we have already made. To do this we also must maintain our base programs required by the Clean Water Act. However, programs individually working on a watershed basis will not be sufficient to attain our vision. A concentrated effort to integrate our programs into a unified, national water program is required.

A few key principles underlie EPA's watershed approach. **Geographic focus** is the first. Management activities need to be directed within specific areas, typically watersheds or basins or groundwater recharge zones. Next, actions need to be driven by **environmental objectives** and supported by strong science and data. Next is **partnerships**. Those parties most affected by the management decisions must be involved throughout and help shape key decisions. Management teams must include local, state, tribal, all appropriate federal agencies and public interest groups.

The last key principles are **coordinated priority setting and integrated solutions**. Through coordinated efforts, appropriate parties can establish priorities and take integrated actions based on consideration of all environmental issues, including threats to public health, and surface and groundwater as well as the need to protect critical habitat and biological integrity.

Because our programs are generally implemented by states, we will look to states to create the framework through which we support local efforts. We will do this by investing in state adaptations. We will encourage states to merge their planning for all water resources into one truly comprehensive effort. We will begin to realign federal services to meet local needs as defined through state programs. In particular, EPA will continue to provide guidance for establishing criteria and standards on a ecoregion basis and we will expand our focus to include issues facing Indian tribes and economically disadvantaged minorities.

We also will expand our focus on physical and biological endpoints. In other words, better environmental indicators such as habitat and wildlife measures. We also will work to improve monitoring capabilities and to coordinate monitoring programs that provide sound information. We will begin, as appropriate, to implement programs such as permit decisions and nonpoint source programs on a watershed basis. We will continue to develop partnerships with other federal agencies as well as with states, tribes, local governments and nongovernmental organizations to achieve our vision.

To do the things I have discussed, there are several questions we must ask ourselves and then answer. First, do our budgets lend themselves to the watershed approach, and, if not, how do we correct this? Second, how can we do everything else we are charged with and also focus on watersheds? This may be a relief to some and a disappointment to others, but we can not be everything to everybody.

We need to find our niche and it may be different in each watershed. It may be a key role in one watershed and a supporting role in others. We need to control expectations. We need to

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define what we realistically hope to achieve. We need to define tangible long-term and short-term goals. We need to be aware of what did and did not work in the past. Are there good examples we can use as guides?

Another important question we must ask is whether we have thought through the politics of implementing the watershed approach. Who is in charge in the watershed? We need to understand and be able to cut through the jurisdictional issues. As I said at the beginning of my talk, many of the resource-driven programs were initiated by the local communities. Therefore, we need to support programs that serve to mobilize individuals in their watersheds.

Finally, we need to actually do something. It has to be more than planning. There will never be enough science to answer all the questions. We believe through enhanced interagency coordination, by building state and tribal watershed programs, developing better environmental indicators, improving internal coordination within EPA and by reaching out to the people in the watershed, our vision can be achieved. We are looking forward to working with you to accomplish our vision.