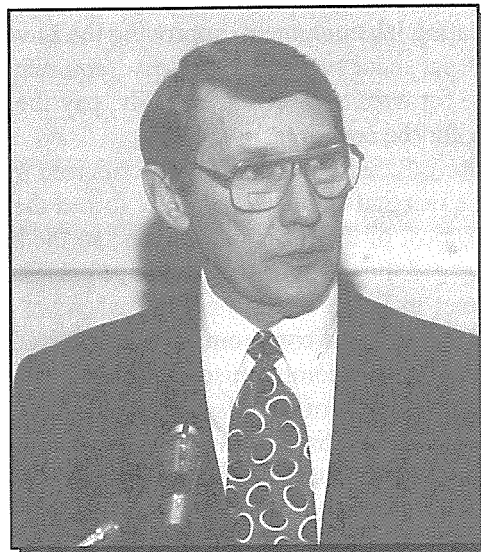


Hal Engle is the Chief Operations Officer for the Entranosa Water Cooperative. Entranosa Water is a medium-size water system of about 3,300 population in a fast growing area about 20 miles east of Albuquerque. After serving two years as Legislative Chairman for New Mexico Rural Water Users Association, Hal was elected President in 1994.



HOW RURAL COMMUNITIES COMPLY WITH THE SAFE DRINKING WATER ACT

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The legislative team for New Mexico Rural Water Users Association is comprised of all members of the Executive Committee. For this article, I will refer to them as the Team. The Team realized in 1992 that many of the small water systems in rural New Mexico would not survive enactment of the new U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) regulations if something wasn't done. Even the lawmakers agreed that something must be done. We held public meetings in each corner of the state which gave all concerned an opportunity to voice their opinions to the Congressmen, EPA representatives from Region 6, and our Team. The concerns were the same throughout the state. If something was not done, most of the small and very small systems would be financially destroyed! People would be forced to go back to the ditch for water. And if we didn't comply with the new standards, the

state could stand to lose primacy. The Team met with New Mexico Environment Department heads and resolved that if a fee were collected on the total water produced, that money could then be used to pay for all the EPA testing scheduled to start very soon.

We then contacted Senator Christene Donisthorpe who is well known and respected for her efforts in the area of environmental issues. The senator agreed to sponsor a bill. She insisted that it must call for a fee rather than an attempt for an appropriation from the general fund. We received information from a study completed by the Environment Department which indicated that a fee of five cents per thousand gallons produced would cover the cost of testing.

It was agreed by all that the fee would be called a "Conservation Fee," and would be collect-

ed by the Tax and Revenue Department, and then turned over to the Environment Department to pay for updating lab equipment, improving the Environment Department staff due to the new requirements, provide for training needs and finally, pay the labs directly for the cost of testing.

Our bill, Senate Bill 391, was criticized by the largest cities that claimed it unfairly forced them to pay for most of the testing costs. And so the battle was engaged. For a time it seemed hopeless. But the Team met in Santa Fe at one point when we were asked to consider a compromise, and resolved, we could not! If we compromised, all small systems would lose. Many of these systems could not survive the cost of testing. So we all worked very hard educating representatives and had to call regional Board Directors many times to request calls to their representatives.

The final argument went like this: the largest cities would only pay 1.5 cents per thousand. But to get to the \$5,000,000 necessary to maintain the program, the cost would escalate inversely with the size of the system with the smallest systems paying 21 cents per thousand. This was no better or worse than the original problem of cost. We held our ground and worked the representatives with the facts. Finally, on the floor of the House the Bill passed, but was amended to 3 cents per thousand for all water users to pay equally. The loss of 2 cents per thousand resulted in training and bacterial testing being left out, but the rest of the program remained intact.

As a result, the smallest systems which would have gone bankrupt, have had their cost for testing lowered by thousands of dollars. We believed then and still believe now, that all water users paying the same amount into this plan, is in the best interest of all New Mexico water users. Our solution to this local problem has been applauded nationwide.

What is the single biggest gain you ask? There seem many from which to choose. But probably, it is that the New Mexico Rural Water Users Association has developed a good working relationship with the New Mexico Environment Department which has resulted in a state circuit rider contract for Rural Water. The Environment Department understands that we will never act as their agent policing water systems. However, the Department also understands that if there is a system out

of compliance, we are ready and able to provide technical hands-on support to the system involved and that we will work with that system to bring it into compliance.