Panelists from left: Tom Turney, Joe Hanson, moderator Tom Bahr, Robert Armstrong, and Steve Vandiver (sitting in for Hal Simpson)

Issues and Concerns of the Rio Grande Compact Commissioners

Moderated by Tom Bahr,
Former Director, WRRI

Bob Armstrong is the newly appointed Federal Rio Grande Compact Commissioner. In 1993, he was confirmed by the U.S. Senate to serve as Assistant Secretary for Land and Minerals Management with the Department of the Interior. Bob has served as a member of the Texas House of Representatives and for 12 years during the 1970s and early 1980s, he was elected to manage 22 1/2 million acres of public land and mineral ownership in Texas. In 1985 he was appointed to the Texas Parks and Wildlife Commission. His experience with conservation organizations includes: The Sierra Club Austin Chapter, which he founded in 1968; the Western States Land Commissioners Association; the Texas Nature Conservancy; a founding board member of the Texas Parks and Wildlife Foundation; and the board of the Trust for Public Land. He is a recipient of the Field and Stream Conservation Award, the Nature Conservancy President's Public Service Award, the Chevron Conservation Award, and the Nature Conservancy's Lifetime Achievement Award for 1997. Bob was born and raised in Austin, Texas. He received a bachelor's degree in 1958 and L.L.B in 1959 from the University of Texas.

Tom Turney is the New Mexico Rio Grande Compact Commissioner and has served as New Mexico State Engineer since 1994. A professional engineer for over 29 years, Tom is licensed in the fields of civil, electrical, sanitary and architectural engineering, and is registered in New Mexico, Colorado and Arizona. Before becoming state engineer, he worked for a number of cities in northwest, central and northeast New Mexico as well as with the Mescalero and Apache tribes. Tom earned both bachelor's and master's degrees in civil engineering from New Mexico State University. He is a native New Mexican, his grandfather having settled in Jornada, New Mexico in the 1880s.

Hal D. Simpson is the Colorado Rio Grande Commissioner and was appointed Colorado's State Engineer in 1992. As State Engineer, Hal is responsible for the direction and management of the Division of Water Resources, which has a staff of 230 and a budget of about $14 million. The State Engineer is Colorado's commissioner on five interstate compacts and is responsible for

assuring compliance with these compacts. Hal served as Deputy State Engineer from 1984 to 1992. He received both B.S. and M.S. degrees in civil engineering from Colorado State University. His master's degree specialized in water resources and groundwater hydrology. He has done post-graduate work in water resources at the University of Colorado. Hal is a registered professional engineer in Colorado, and is a second generation native from the Greeley area where he grew up on a dryland wheat farm with a small dairy.
Note: Commissioner Simpson was unable to attend due to an unanticipated change in scheduling. Steve Vandiver, of the Colorado Division of Water Resources, spoke for Commissioner Simpson. Steve also presented a paper earlier in the conference.

Joe G . Hanson received a bachelor's degree in geology from the University of Texas at El Paso. In 1962 he started his own business, Hanson Farms, and in 1968 he added Hanson Homes. From 1985 to the present, he has been Chairman of the Board for Hanson Development Corporation. Joe has been involved in a number of business and civic organizations and currently is Vice Chairman, Board of Fellows at UTEP, Board Member, Bank of the West; and Member, Chancellors Council, University of Texas System. In January 1999, Joe became the Rio Grande Compact Commissioner for Texas.

Bob Armstrong

Good morning. My e-mail address is "landmanbob" and as that name would indicate, I have not had much to do with water, but in the last couple of years, I have been gravitating more toward water issues. Recently I headed a presidential commission that looked at recreational lakes. Federal lakes were once primarily used for storage for irrigation purposes. Now we have more than 1.5 billion visits to federal facilities including the national parks and 900 million of those visits are to lakes for recreational purposes. That number surpasses national park visits by 15 million. With work on recreational lakes, I developed a good rapport with the Senate and hopefully they will enact into law some good suggestions.

Perhaps the man who has influenced me more about water is Wayne Elmore. He just looks at how we can slow the water down. I was delighted to see that Bill Zedick got his award because he, like Elmore, starts at the headwaters to see how we can slow it down.

I consider myself a very lucky person because just a week after I am appointed to the Rio Grande Compact Commission, I'm invited to this gathering of people ready to teach me about what they are doing regarding the Compact. I would say we have the best minds that you could get for this kind of event. There are going to be problems and we recognize those problems, particularly concerning growth issues. But if we can bring these peoples' minds to bear on these problems, we will prevail.

At this time, I don't have any pontifical statements to make, but I will when we have another meeting like this. I am delighted to be here and I want to thank Bob Creel for putting on a good show.

Steve Vandiver (Standing in for Colorado Commissioner Hal Simpson)

I'm obviously not Hal Simpson–he was detained by our governor. There is a drought and flood conference put on by the Department of Natural Resources in Denver, Colorado yesterday and today and Hal is there with the governor. He expressed his apologies for not being able to be here and certainly I know he would have enjoyed what has transpired. I did ask him what he wanted

me to say though and I will try to express his thoughts on pressing issues and concerns.

As you heard yesterday, one of Colorado's biggest concerns is water supply. Without reservoirs and without the ability to control our water, we are pretty much at the mercy of what runs off the mountains. The average annual rainfall where I live at Alamosa is 6.9 inches and we are partially surrounded by 14,000 foot mountains on three sides. It doesn't allow for a lot of precipitation to help augment our water supply. We dodged a bullet last year. We were looking at about a 40% of normal snowpack the first week of last April, which would have resulted in much less than that in runoff. The good Lord saw to it that we got two snowstorms and a whole summer's worth of rain. We ended up with almost a million acre-feet from what would have been probably 300,000 acre-feet. We can't depend upon last year's good fortune every year. This year we have started with the same minimal snowpack. It is easy to see why one of our biggest concerns is our water supply and how we deal with it.

Secondly, Colorado is extremely concerned with the preservation of benefits under the Rio Grande Compact. Through negotiations, Colorado was afforded certain benefits under the Compact. We received allocations just as New Mexico and Texas did. However, circumstances like a spill at Elephant Butte, minimum unfilled capacity provisions, and issues of proposed Compact reservoirs–all those events play a role in determining the usable water supply in Colorado. We are very much interested in making sure that Colorado's benefits are preserved. An issue that would force potential changes to Colorado's benefits includes changes in the operation of the Rio Grande Project. That is a terribly difficult subject that we are involved in right now. Colorado wants to stay out of that fight very badly, but at the same time wants to make sure that whatever changes occur, they do not change the benefits that we were provided in the Rio Grande Compact. We have expressed to the downstream districts and to the other two states that we support and acknowledge the fact that changes are needed to respond to demands. All we ask is that the other interests in the basin are considered in what is done, and if there are simple solutions to preserving benefits to the upstream states, that we do that. Growth issues are certainly a part of that and I will leave those issues to the other commissioners to discuss.

Endangered species issues are a concern. We have many endangered species of our own in Colorado and for many years, we wished them away. Finally our wishes couldn't hold up any more and we have learned some very difficult lessons on how to handle endangered species issues. The Colorado River is a good example of changes in operations and the use of existing facilities to accommodate issues involving endangered species. The challenge to all of us is to accommodate those new demands, and it is our belief that you can do that with existing facilities, with changes in operations, and with re-regulation in some cases. The problem is that solutions are often site specific and species specific much of the time. You cannot necessarily take one basin's solution and apply it directly to another, unfortunately. You can certainly use the good ideas that are developed. We also feel that given the tremendous facilities that exist in New Mexico, there are facilities in place that can help with their efforts. Colorado has tried to be helpful in identifying solutions that could help other states.

Lastly, we hope that everyone uses the best management practices available. In my presentation yesterday, I tried to explain what Colorado is doing regarding its use of best management practices in order to meet our obligation as well as to be able to best use our entitlements under the Compact. A tremendous amount of work and resources are needed to do that, but it can be done. It requires a lot of money and human resources, and state legislators must understand its importance. The only way that legislators can grasp its importance is if the people in this room make sure they understand. Those are the major issues that concern Colorado and look forward to working with the other Compact commissioners and all of you in this room to address the challenges of using a very limited resource for an ever-changing and ever-increasing demand.

Thank you.

Tom Turney

This is probably the best attended water conference I have ever attended. I think it is great, and I want to thank Tom Bahr, Bob Creel and the WRRI staff for all the effort that they have put into this conference. I don't think I've ever seen this room so crowded with people.

New Mexico does have issues and concerns regarding the Rio Grande Compact and I am going to guess at what we may see over the next ten years. One of the issues that will definitely be at the forefront, at least in the next two or three years and maybe even five to ten years, concerns endangered species. How are we going to get the silvery minnow from being placed in jeopardy? If there are depletions associated with re-operation of the river for the silvery minnow, where are those depletions going to come from? Where will the flows that will be necessary to offset those depletions come from? Where will those water rights come from? It is very, very important that New Mexico be able to meet its interstate compact obligations. This is a major question for us. I was pleased to hear this morning that the United States Fish and Wildlife Services was not necessarily against the reconstruction of the low-flow channel. The low-flow channel is important to the state of New Mexico's ability to meet its compact obligations. New Mexico is definitely going to have to become involved in the operation of the Rio Grande. For the first time, the state will be participating in a joint effort in preparing the final assessment dealing with this issue.

In the next few years, you are going to be hearing from me a lot about something called "active river management." This is something in which the state of New Mexico must become a major player. A key part of active river management concerns measuring flows. Irrigation districts along the river have already become leaders in measuring diversions and return flows. Next year, with some money that has been set aside, we will be continuing to measure and perhaps expand that program. Yesterday, during Steve Vandiver's talk, I was reminded that it will become increasingly more important that the state actively participate in adjudication of the water along the Rio Grande. We already have a number of ongoing adjudications on tributaries to the Rio Grande, like on the Lower Rio Grande where we are using GPS-GIS technologies. We are completing hydrographic surveys in record time, hoping they can be finished in 36 months. That 36-month timetable will probably be reduced to 12 to18 months as we move up the river. I am also dealing with the San Juan River, although I have not yet made a priority judgement between the Upper Rio Grande and the San Juan River yet. I believe education is a key element in managing the state's water resources.

Growth issues along the river are going to become more and more important. Albuquerque has been mining groundwater for quite awhile, but they want to change that strategy by moving toward surface water usage, while preserving groundwater for drought periods. For the past few decades, Albuquerque has been augmenting the Rio Grande flow by discharges through their wastewater treatment facilities. Ultimately, as Albuquerque moves toward more reliance on surface water and less on mining groundwater, this augmentation may decrease. One big question that remains is what will happen when this augmentation begins to decrease–what will be the impact on meeting our compact obligations?

The issue of domestic wells was brought up this morning and it's an issue states are going to have to face. We heard numbers tossed around this morning of an estimated 19,000 acre-feet of diversions from domestic wells just along the Rio Grande. We are issuing new permits out of the Albuquerque office at the rate of about 3,000 a year, and this number will probably increase. People like our current system–they come in and pay us five dollars and we issue a domestic well permit. However, the challenge we will face is how to continue having a process where it is very easy for people to obtain a domestic well permit from my office and at the same time, the existing senior water rights are protected and we continue to meet our compact delivery obligations. I think there will be a lot of discussion over the next few years on domestic wells in the Rio Grande Valley and the type of policies we want to adopt with respect to domestic wells.

New Mexico is faced with pressures from many different stakeholders: Rio Grande rafters out of Pilar and similar places, those who fish along the river, acequias, municipalities, traditional agriculture interests like the Middle Rio Grande Conservancy District, and the Endangered Species Act. All these stakeholders are going to

be putting enormous pressure on the state and certainly I can see that our future is going to be very, very challenging.

Thank you.

Joe Hanson

As I was visiting with Herman Settemeyer**,** the Texas Compact Coordinator about what I was going to say today, Herman said "Don't worry about it too much because by the time they get to you, about half the audience will have left, half of the rest will be asleep, and most of the rest are going to wish that you would hurry up and finish what you have to say so they can go to lunch." So with that in mind, I'll keep my remarks very brief.

It goes without saying I think, that the primary concern for the state of Texas is that the upstream states comply with the terms and conditions of the Rio Grande Compact. That is primary and goes without saying. Everything that has been discussed here for the last day-and-a-half is of concern to all of us–upstream, downstream, Texas, New Mexico, and Colorado, because it shows us the increased demands on the system. El Paso, Albuquerque, Las Cruces and all the metropolitan areas are going to have to rely on the Rio Grande for their primary source of water. And others like the environmentalists, the Native Americans, and recreational water users also will put demands on the system. I wish I could tell you that I see a time of dialog and harmony, and of peace and goodwill on the river, but unfortunately I do not see that. I think we are going to spend a tremendous amount of human and financial assets on attorneys, engineers, and hydrologists over the next number of years until we can finally sit down with each other and learn to cooperate and use every drop of water to its maximum and most beneficial use.

Thank you.