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PANEL DISCUSSION: PLANNING FOR NEW MEXICO'S WATER FUTURE

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Recently, the Interstate Stream Commission and State Engineer released the first draft of the new State Water Plan. They state that the Plan will be finalized by the end of 2003, but will be a "living plan" that is revised and updated as circumstances change.

New Mexico is way overdue in getting a State Water Plan. One thing is certain: we cannot protect the things that we care about, be they senior water rights, rural communities, rivers, aquifers, jobs, or simply what we call our "quality of life," absent a strong State Water Plan. An effective State Water Plan must have clear policies and requirements, must integrate the regional water plans into a cohesive whole, and ultimately must integrate closely with local land use and zoning requirements.

The draft State Water Plan has a long way to go, but it is a good start. The hardest part lies ahead, as the State begins to implement the policies of the Plan and to determine how we might be able to meet the water needs of our ever-expanding population, which the U.S. Census Bureau projects will increase by nearly a million people by 2025. Some major concerns are:

- We should not count on significant new water supplies: Many ideas for significant new water supplies will not prove feasible or desirable or will have substantial unintended negative consequences. Major new proposals to increase supplies (e.g., new dams or reservoirs, large-scale forest thinning or salt cedar removal, underground storage, reclaiming brackish or produced water) should be studied

carefully before making major commitments. We are spending tens of millions of dollars dealing with unintended negative consequences of many of our past water supply infrastructure works. We should do our homework before plunging ahead.

- We should invest heavily in conservation. Problems with creating new water supplies or transferring large quantities of water from rural areas to cities make conservation our best and probably cheapest new source of water.
- Major new funding is required for effective Plan implementation. A portion of the funding should be set aside for protection of rivers and riparian areas (compliance with federal Endangered Species Act and Clean Water Act requirements).