

**Tracy Seidman Hephner** is a full-time rancher. She and her husband, John, share responsibilities on two ranches, seventy miles apart in Mora and Colfax counties. They raise commercial Brangus cattle, registered Corrientes, and ranch horses. Tracy served on the New Mexico Interstate Stream Commission for nearly fourteen years, under four governors and a progression of State Engineers. She has been actively involved in water planning since the regional legislation was enacted in 1986 as co-chair of the ISC Water Planning Committee, a director of the New Mexico Water Dialogue, and a member of her local planning group. She represented Mora County on the ISC Ad Hoc Committee of Regional Water Planners and at the recent State Water Planning Town Hall. In June 2003, Tracy was appointed by President Bush to the Board of Trustees of the Valles Caldera National Preserve. Tracy is a well-known basket maker, utilizing native materials and paying homage to Anasazi baskets fragments found in the nearby Canadian River Canyon. Her work has been shown throughout the West and has been featured in several national publications.



**Joanne Hilton** is a Senior Hydrologist at Daniel B. Stephens & Associates, Inc. She has a B.S. from the University of Arizona and an M.S. from Colorado State University, both in hydrology, and more than 15 years of experience conducting hydrological and water resource investigations. Her experience includes regional hydrogeologic investigations, regional water planning, groundwater/surface water interactions, preparation of 40-year water plans, surface water analyses, analysis of water policy and water rights, water quality investigations, groundwater supply investigations, and design and implementation of surface and groundwater monitoring programs. She has been the project manager for development of regional water plans for five New Mexico regions (Colfax, Jemez y Sangre, Socorro-Sierra, Mora-San Miguel and Southwest New Mexico), two of which have been accepted by the Interstate Stream Commission. The regional planning efforts have focused on synthesizing information regarding New Mexico surface and groundwater resources, water rights, institutional and policy issues, and future water demands. Water resource alternatives considered in the planning efforts include options such as agricultural water conservation, watershed management, desalination, drought contingency planning, and improvements to infrastructure. In addition to her regional water planning experience, Joanne has also worked on the wetlands restoration, water supply development, development of water quality standards, groundwater monitoring, and watershed management projects.



## A RURAL PERSPECTIVE ON REGIONAL WATER PLANNING FROM THE MORA-SAN MIGUEL WATER PLANNING REGION

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The Mora-San Miguel Planning region encompasses all of Mora and San Miguel counties in north-central New Mexico (Figure 1). The region contains portions of both the Canadian River and the Upper Pecos River, as illustrated on Figure 2. These two river systems provide the primary water supplies for the region.

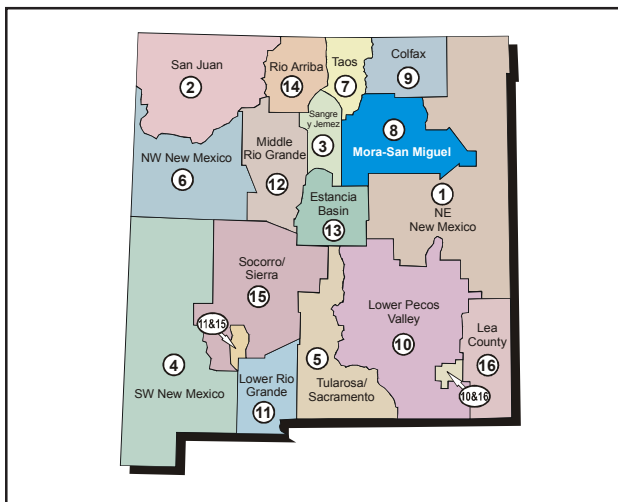


Figure 1. Location of Mora-San Miguel Planning Region

The population of Mora County is about 5,200, and the San Miguel population is about 30,000. Both of these rural counties are growing, especially along the Interstate 25 corridor near Santa Fe. Mora County is expected to reach a population of 6,000 to 8,500 in the 40-year planning period, and the San Miguel County population is expected to be 44,000 to 54,000 in the same time frame. Much of the population of San Miguel County is clustered around Las Vegas, New Mexico.

The vast majority of the water supply in the Mora-San Miguel region is provided by surface water. Greater than 95 percent of the Mora County water use is for irrigated agriculture (Figure 3). In San Miguel County, surface water also represents more than 95 percent of the water use, with irrigation and reservoir evaporation the primary uses (Figure 4). Though groundwater use is small, it is an important supply for domestic and stock wells and provides a portion of the municipal supply for the City of Las Vegas. Groundwater is present in two Office of the State Engineer (OSE) declared basins (the Canadian and Upper Pecos) and in undeclared basins in the southeastern portion of the planning area.

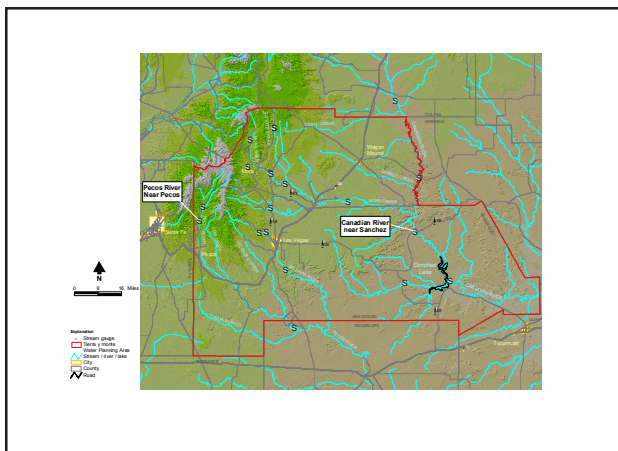


Figure 2. Surface Water Resources

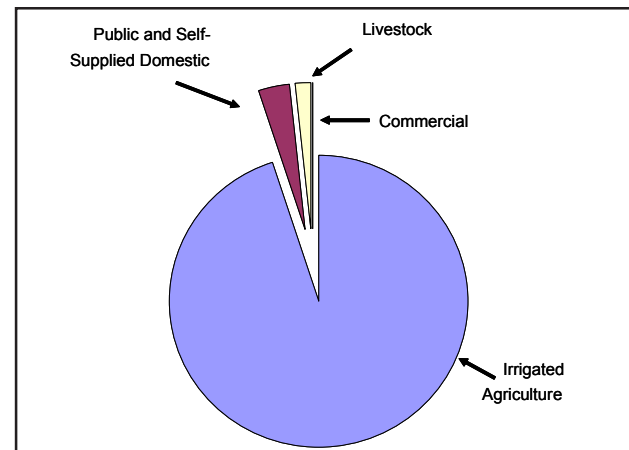


Figure 3. Mora County Water Use in 2000

## A Rural Perspective on Regional Water Planning from the Mora-San Miguel Water Planning Region

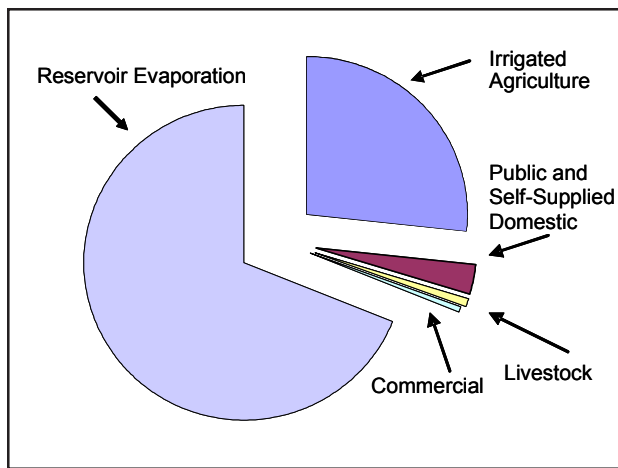


Figure 4. San Miguel County Water Use in 2000

In Mora and San Miguel counties, there are 116 acequia associations and 70 domestic water systems. These large numbers of relatively small systems covering the large planning area present a unique water planning challenge in terms of bringing together water users in the region. Many of the residents in the rural areas can trace their lineage back hundreds of years on the same family land, and for these residents, the acequia systems still form the basis of community and sustenance. Preservation of the acequia systems and irrigated agriculture in the region is therefore an important water planning goal.

Like many other picturesque places in New Mexico, Mora County has been discovered by wealthy newcomers, and many large ranches have changed

hands over the past few years. Many of these new ranchers, who in some cases come from places where water is more abundant, have taken advantage of a provision in state law that allows ranchers to build ponds of less than 10 acre-feet without a permit and have built multiple small ponds for scenic appeal or for fish and waterfowl.

The many acequias of Mora County depend on that same water to feed their farms and families. Accustomed to sharing shortages, the local irrigators had assumed that the lack of water flowing down the Mora River was due to drought. However, it appears that the new ranch owners, many of whom neither actively ranch or farm, have captured water considered the lifeblood of the downstream communities. Unfortunately, as is common in rural areas, senior water rights holders often do not have the resources to successfully implement legal challenges to the upstream diversions. Even with recent stock pond legislation, the question of how to address these impoundments continues to challenge the communities.

Other key water issues facing the planning region include:

- Because the acequia systems and many of the domestic water systems rely on surface water, vulnerability to drought is also a key issue in the planning region. As shown on Figure 5, supplies vary greatly between wet and dry years, and in dry years the available supply is insufficient to meet demands.

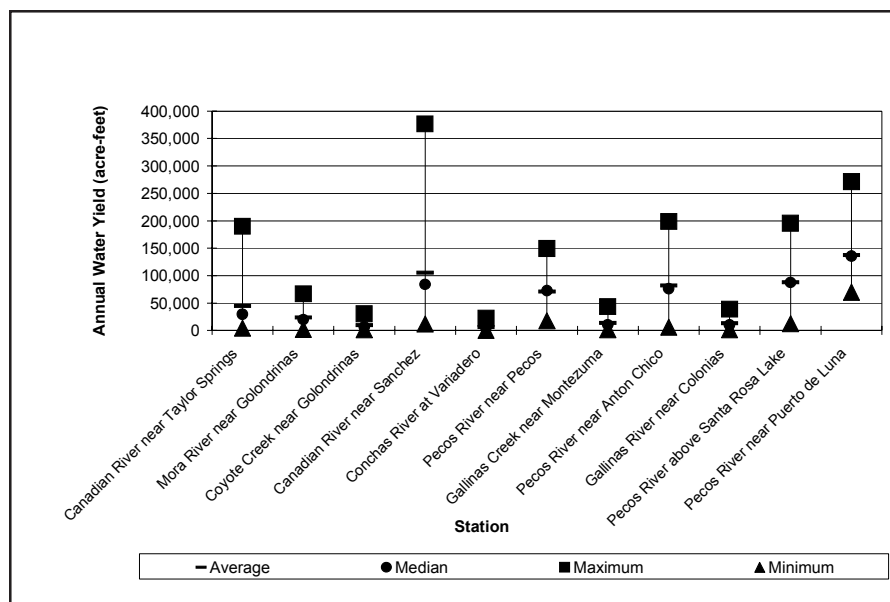


Figure 5. Annual Water Yield, 1950-2002

- Improving the efficiency of agricultural deliveries and crop production, particularly when supplies are short, is also a key planning objective for the region.
- In conjunction with drought vulnerability, the dependence on surface water supplies creates a vulnerability to forest fires and potential sedimentation of reservoirs.
- A New Mexico Supreme Court decision that granted the City of Las Vegas water rights of historic significance (deemed pueblo water rights) helped secure water for the City. A group of irrigators in outlying communities, joined by the OSE, later asked the Court to reexamine its decision. The case has traveled through the state court system and now rests again with the New Mexico Supreme Court. Whatever the verdict, it will bring change and challenge to San Miguel County.
- In the undeclared areas, citizens have no recourse when new water users impair existing users.

In summary, the changes facing rural communities all over New Mexico are present in the counties of San Miguel and Mora. Their citizens struggle to maintain a treasured way of life in the face of increased demand for water and financial resources. The rural nature of the planning area presents both some obstacles and some opportunities for regional water planning. The size of the area presents logistical challenges in bringing together the various stakeholders. Conversely, the smaller population as compared to the urban planning regions makes it easier to work together on water issues.