

Reining in the Rio Grande

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The Rio Grande is our limiting resource. What do you want to do with it?

Where are we headed under current system?

- Inexorable erosion of agricultural water rights: Municipalities and industry offer alluringly high prices. Exigency will eventually induce most farmers to sell out.
- Conversion of farmland to low-density housing: little reduction in water consumption right to consumption becomes inflexible
- Unchecked growth of urban centers: Where do we want to stop?
- Loss of all riparian ecosystems: Caught between the demands of growing population and the delivery requirements of the Rio Grande Compact, the river will have to be confined.

Principles we would suggest

1. Formally recognize that water is New Mexico's limiting resource.

Money, energy, population, intellectual capital – all of these can be imported or increased. Water is a zero-sum game. Any new use of water requires taking it away from a user already here. Where the water goes determines what the State will be.

2. Strengthen the principle that water is a resource owned by the public as a whole.

New Mexico's constitution recognizes public ownership of water, but is never really specific in balancing that with private "appropriation" of water. It needs to strengthen the statement of the right of the public to manage and allocate water in the public interest.

3. Maintain private rights to water diversion and make temporary transfers (i.e., leasing) easier.

Investment in society by individuals and corporations requires water security, but temporary transfers can serve as a “safety valve” to reallocate water where it is needed in either times of excess supply or shortfall.

4. Recognizing that water is NM’s limiting resource, allocate water so as to achieve the societal goals of the population.

Under the current laws, transfers of water are inevitable and invisible and will finally result in a state that most citizens probably consider undesirable. Instead, why not allocate water to the major sectors (agriculture, municipal, industry, environment) to achieve the desired state?

Integrating these core principles into every action
will go far in protecting our water future.

Core Concepts

1. Balance growth with renewable supply.
2. Integrate local governments' water budgets into the Regional Water Budget and work to balance consumption with renewable supply.
3. Assign some explicit value to water.
4. Assign some explicit value to traditional environmental and cultural uses.
5. Make the ecological preservation of the Rio Grande an explicit goal in water management strategies.

--Frank Titus, 2006

Senator Bingaman's list of five reasonable objectives for us to pursue:

- Insure an adequate supply of water for current and future needs.
- Insure that our uses of water are sustainable.
- Protect valid existing water rights.
- Insure our uses of water are consistent with protecting the environment; and
- Facilitate the use of water for highest value purposes.

Core Concepts

Integrating these core principles into every action will go far in protecting our water future

1. Balance growth with renewable supply.

By including this principle in planning, the Resolution goals of balancing use with renewable supply and replenishing water levels in the aquifer could be better achieved, plus it would underscore the seriousness of the Authority to address the current state of the water resource.

2. Integrate the Authority's Water Budget into the Regional Water Budget, and work with other entities to balance the consumption with renewable supply.

The Authority's Water Budget is a subset of the Regional Water Budget. Therefore, the Authority should work with other jurisdictions to share the task of balancing the regional water use with renewable supply and implement sustainable water resource management to reduce water consumption, minimize impact on water resources, encourage conservation-oriented economic development, ensure adequate water supplies for any proposed development, protect and enhance the environment, integrate with other major plans in the region, and consider the carrying capacity and location of development.

3. Assign some explicit value to water.

The resource itself is not valued. The rates are oriented toward the cost of providing water to customers. There are social and environmental opportunity costs of losing other benefits of the water and natural waterways. To encourage conservation, water itself needs to be valued. This could be by including opportunity cost or scarcity value of water when calculating cost of service, or by including an explicit statement of conservation goal in water rate structures.

4. Assign some explicit value to traditional environmental and cultural uses.

Residents value the environmental, historical and cultural aspects of the region, much of which is integral to water. The protection of river-related open space will ensure aquifer recharge and protect wildlife habitat and the unique heritage values of rural and semi-rural areas. Agricultural and environmental values should be considered in any water transfer.

5. Make the ecological preservation of the Rio Grande an explicit goal in water management strategies.

A healthy and sustainable Albuquerque and Bernalillo County, not to mention New Mexico, are intricately tied to a healthy river ecosystem. Economic growth which erodes the environment will not be sustainable, and should not be described as true progress. Protection of the Rio Grande ecosystem does not just mean an acknowledgement of the riparian use of water within the management area. It requires the Authority (as well as other entities along the river) to designate the *quantity, quality* and *timing* of river flows that need to be protected in order to sustain the river. It also means that a threshold needs to be set on how much can be taken out of the river. The Authority should play a central role in encouraging the Office of State Engineer to recognize in-stream flows as a beneficial use not only in terms of the ecosystem, but in terms of a public trust.

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