

## **Water for the future: will we have enough? Or, how will we change our water demand and our water supplies so they match?**

To answer that question, we must look first to the Interstate Stream Commission (ISC) which is now in the midst of planning New Mexico's water future. The ISC's stated reasons for water planning include "assure sufficient affordable clean water to meet human and environmental needs, while maintaining all of our desired New Mexican lifestyles – now, and for future generations."<sup>1</sup> To that end 16 regions are currently working toward updating their Water Plans.

Water planning issues have been brought to public attention by the New Mexico Water Dialogue for more than two decades. The Water Dialogue's mission is to "promote the wise stewardship and assure the availability of water resources for future generations of New Mexicans".<sup>2</sup> On January 7, 2016 the Dialogue hosted its 22d Annual Statewide Meeting, called "Planning: How it Can Make a Difference", which drew visitors from all over New Mexico interested in improving the water planning process and its outcomes.

One session, a panel discussion titled "Knowing the Problem", began with a presentation by Aron Balok of the Pecos Valley Artesian Conservancy District. Balok described the prior appropriation system as essential to quantifying available water. "Work within the realities of the system we have," he said. "Water is a private property right as well as an economic driver," he continued. "Policy depends on knowing how much water we have and how much we need. Trading water can become a reality."

Norm Gaume, former Director of the ISC and a water resources engineer, expressed serious reservations about three current water schemes: the Gila River, the Santolina development, and the San Augustin Plains projects, all of which directly affect Catron County. "In each of these cases, the solutions are put forward because they would make money for the proponents, who struggle and lie to define a matching problem and ignore or attempt to bulldoze out-of-their way pertinent alternatives and stakeholder values."

According to Gaume, these three projects have three things in common: none are solutions selected through planning; all masquerade as solutions to public problems; and all depend on distortions or suspension of hydrologic reality.

What these projects really do, says Gaume, is speculate in water to seek private profit at public expense. The proponents substitute sales rhetoric for the facts, and disregard unresponsive data. Gaume advocates for a very different process which is aimed at understanding and defining problems, defining and developing alternatives, engaging in clear and transparent thinking, and selecting solutions.

### Santolina

Virginia Necochea, Executive Director, Center for Social Sustainable Systems, spoke to the value of water as it relates to community, especially acequia culture and customs. Necochea has been a leader in the fight to defeat the Santolina development southwest of Albuquerque, which poses a direct threat to Catron County water. The proposed pipeline from the Augustin Plains Ranch would extend all the way to the general area of the Santolina and the Albuquerque Bernalillo County Water Utility Authority, which – perhaps speciously -- claims to be able to provide water to the Santolina.

### Gila River

The third project of the three discussed by Norm Gaume, the Gila River, has been the center of a planning effort since the Arizona Water Settlements Act passed the Congress in 2004, providing millions of dollars for projects approved by the ISC. Years of "stakeholder" meetings resulted in proposals for the development of 14,000 acre-feet per year of river water.

According to Truth Out<sup>3</sup>, "[An] expensive water diversion and storage plan [was] concocted by engineers and state planners in New Mexico's Interstate Stream Commission ... Though 45 different proposals for use of the tens of millions of dollars in federal funds made available by the

2004 Settlement Act were submitted to the ISC, only one was approved with adequate funding for serious consideration: their own - the largest, most unwieldy and ecologically damaging one, which would necessitate nine-tenths of the funding miraculously materializing from elsewhere.” Whatever your position on the river diversion may be, an important question to ask is “Does the decision reflect good planning?”

#### Augustin Plains

The Augustin Plains Ranch proposal, which would move 54,000 acre-feet of water each year from northern Catron County to points east and north, has threatened the county for more than eight years. Can residents plan while that threat hangs over the community? Everyone from ranchers to retirees must hold their breaths until this threat is defeated.

#### Conclusion

How well is the planning process going, then? Keep in mind that the ISC, which advocates for the diversion of the Gila River, is the same body that leads the planning process that will result in Regional Water Plans. The Water Dialogue panel and the subsequent discussion with meeting attendees brought home the need for the public to be involved in water issues. Our communities, our culture, our way of life in New Mexico all depend on you, the citizen, making your voices heard.

1 New Mexico Regional Water Planning, Governance Study Group, Summary of Issue Papers' Recommendations, December 24, 2015

2 Our Mission and Bylaws, website, New Mexico Water Dialogue

3 <http://www.truth-out.org/news/item/34331-the-battle-to-save-new-mexico-s-last-wild-river>