

Sen. Udall speaks at water conference

By John Larson — El Defensor Chieftain Staff Writer Aug 17, 2017

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New Mexico Tech hosted the 62nd annual New Mexico Water Resources Research Institute Conference this week, featuring experienced water specialists addressing questions on farmland retirement, innovations in watershed management, underground storage and recovery projects, use of brackish and impaired waters in New Mexico, and the Rio Grande Compact.

In addition, U.S. Senator Tom Udall of New Mexico gave an update on efforts resulting from the 2012 conference report.

He said Socorro was the “ideal backdrop for discussing smart strategies for the enormous water challenges facing our state today.”

Two bipartisan bills sponsored by Udall passed the senate last year as part of an energy bill; the Smart Energy and Water Efficiency Act which addresses the relationship between the water used for energy production and the energy consumed to extract, purify, deliver, heat/cool, treat and dispose of water, and the Water Efficiency Improvement Act, which would make the EPA’s popular WaterSense program permanent.

Rethinking the nation’s water infrastructure is long overdue, Udall said, and outlined the current water resource management landscape.

“I always like to start with John Wesley Powell’s map of the watersheds in the West,” Udall said. “I have that map hanging in my office in Washington.”

Powell, director of the U.S. Geological Survey from 1881 to 1894, proposed policies for development of the arid regions of the West, and thought state lines should follow watershed boundaries...”and if they didn’t, there would be water problems. Well, he was right,” Udall said. “On top of that, western water has a 19th century legal framework with 20th century infrastructure and 21st century pressures of increasing demand and climate change.”

He said New Mexico’s long-term water supply and consumption are out of balance, even with current conservation efforts.

“Water professionals here today know this in technical terms,” Udall said. “Farmers here know this in personal terms.”

Udall pointed out that the legal system rewards use, not conservation, and although laws are adapting by and large most remain on the books.

With water lines and treatment plants decades old, he said, that 20th century infrastructure is aging. “In the U.S. there are more than \$350 billion dollars’ worth of water infrastructure needs. Much of that is simply maintenance and repair. “

“The needs I am talking about are not big new dams and pipelines. The era of guaranteed big federal investment in new water projects is largely over,” Udall said, but instead should focus on maintaining the water infrastructure already in place.

“I am pushing for a federal infrastructure package that would help address these needs, especially in the West,” he said.

On the issue of supply and demand, Udall said he's been told by regional water managers that in the coming decades there will be water shortages everywhere in our state except the San Juan Basin.

The climate isn't help either.

"In the Southwest, we've seen a 2.5 degree temperature increase since 1971, and just last week, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration reported that 2016 was Earth's warmest year on record," Udall said. "In addition, the Bureau of Reclamation projects that the Rio Grande Basin will be hit the hardest over the coming century -- warming five to six degrees by 2100."

Which would presumably cut the water flow south of Elephant Butte by half.

"And that is on top of a similar-size reduction from the San Juan Chama project -- based on changes in New Mexico's Colorado River allocations in low water years," he said. "These are big challenges. Tensions can run high over water in the West. Inter-basin transfers, endangered species, municipal versus rural users, Texas versus New Mexico, the U.S. versus Mexico."

Udall said the science of climate change should not be political.

"We must make our policy decisions based on the science and our responsibility to future generations and the first natural system affected by climate change is water. And that threat is here and now," he said. "We have seen this first-hand in New Mexico; severe droughts, decreased snow pack, flooding caused by uncharacteristically warm winters and springs, and catastrophic fires causing severe erosion and damaging surface water. The time to adapt is now."

Udall encouraged conference attendees to not take sides in conflicts.

"Rest assured," he said. "We have plenty of conflict in Washington these days. Cooperation will be the only successful strategy...to prepare for drought, to adapt to climate change, and to modernize our integrated water system. We must balance agriculture use, urban areas, and ecosystem needs."

"The Middle Rio Grande Conservancy District, Elephant Butte, our Tribes and Pueblos, acequia associations, our arroyo flood control authorities, water utilities and other state and local agencies are working hard on these issues every day."

In what sounded like a call to action, Udall said, "You can help think through the new round of challenges we have -- and work together to solve problems...as Margaret Mead famously said, 'Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.'"

The New Mexico Water Resources Research Institute is located in Las Cruces at New Mexico State University that funds research conducted by faculty and students from universities across the state to address water problems critical to New Mexico and the Southwest.