

Official: New Mexico water debate to be shaped by transfers

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ALBUQUERQUE >> Drought has eased its grip on New Mexico, but the arid state still will be faced with having to weigh proposals that call for transferring water across basins to where it's needed most, a top water official said Monday.

State Engineer Tom Blaine told members of a legislative committee focused on water and natural resources that inter-basin transfers are going to become a hot topic.

He pointed to a plan to pipe billions of gallons of drinking water from rural western New Mexico to more populated areas.

The Augustin Plains Ranch application was first rejected more than two years ago after the previous state engineer determined the proposal was vague and its effects could not be reasonably evaluated. It was one of the most contested filings in the history of the state engineer's office.

A court battle ensued and a new application was filed in December. It will be up to Blaine's office to decide whether to clear the way for a hearing on the latest proposal.

"These are issues that really are concerning," he told lawmakers. "We need to develop some strong approaches on how we're going to address these and what are the impacts of taking (agriculture) water out of production. There are serious, serious questions that need to be asked."

Before the Augustin Plains proposal, another group of developers floated a plan to move water from eastern New Mexico to populated counties along the Rio Grande valley. That, too, was rejected by state officials.

Now, New Mexico has years of planning ahead of it as it tries to decide what to do with its share of the Gila River under a settlement with Arizona. Some proposals have called for piping water out of the basin to other thirsty areas.

Some lawmakers suggested New Mexico needs to take a look at decades-old laws that govern the reallocation of water rights and transfers as drought persists.

Sen. Joe Cervantes, D-Las Cruces, whose family irrigates hundreds of acres of farmland in southern New Mexico, said he misses the days of seeing water reach the lower stretches of the Rio Grande.

"The bottom line is we're moving water to various parts of the state. We're moving it here to Santa Fe, we're moving it to Albuquerque," he said. "We're going to have to figure out how to move water from places it exists to where it's needed."

After four straight years of severe drought, New Mexico has started to turn the corner. Late-season snowfall in the higher elevations, cooler temperatures and back-to-back spring storms have combined to make for the best conditions the state has seen since 2010.

Still, weather forecasters say it will take even more rain to erase the long-term effects of the drought.