



## *2009 State Water Plan Update Public Outreach*

**Region: Socorro/Sierra  
New Mexico Tech  
Socorro, NM  
April 22, 2009**

### **Summary of Discussion**

**Facilitator/Recorder:** Lucy Moore

### **Welcome and Introductions**

Angela Bordegaray, State Water Planner with the Interstate Stream Commission, welcomed the group of 30 to this public forum sponsored jointly by the Office of the State Engineer and the Interstate Stream Commission. She introduced Office of the State Engineer/Interstate Stream Commission (OSE/ISC) staff and contractors:

Rolf Schmidt-Petersen, ISC Rio Grande Bureau Chief  
Martha Franks, Legal Counsel (contracted)  
Karin Stangl, Planning and Communication Division Director  
Julie Maas, Public Relations Specialist  
Maureen Haney, Public Relations Specialist  
Wayne Canon, OSE District I Office Water Resource Supervisor  
Gary Stansifer, OSE District I Water Master.

### **Presentation**

Bordegaray presented an overview of the state water planning process to date, including data on population, water supplies and demands, and highlights from the local Socorro-Sierra Counties Regional Water Plan.

### **Questions and Comments on Presentation**

Lucy Moore, contracted facilitator, introduced herself and explained that she was contracted by the agency to help facilitate some of the state water plan review meetings. The group made the following comments on the presentation.

#### Population projections:

Question: The group asked the population projection for the region, which predicts an increase of only 3,000 by the year 2040. Understanding that different agencies have different projections, a participant asked why OSE/ISC chose this particular one.

Answer: OSE/ISC staff explained that the population projections were developed by the University of New Mexico's Bureau of Business and Economic Research (BBER). Using census data and historical trends, they projected the population in a range format, acknowledging an inevitable level of uncertainty. [Please note: Staff has since re-checked the data and confirmed that the population projections reported at the meeting come from the 2008 UNM-BBER Population Dynamics report. This report is located on the agency's website at:

<http://www.ose.state.nm.us/PDF/Publications/TechnicalReports/BBER-WPR-Estimates-Projections-Aug2008.pdf>.]

#### Out-of-basin or inter-basin transfers:

Question: One participant was concerned with the application filed in 2008 that would pump large amounts of potable water from the San Agustin Plains area for development outside the region. The ISC and over 400 others have protested the application on grounds of potential impairment of local water users. The town of Magdalena will probably be impacted first, they said. Local residents are concerned about the loss of the water, the impairment to wells, and the fact that the dried-up land will be invaded by non-native species.

Answer: A hearing date for the application is not yet set. Staff explained that in all cases, the applicant may choose to negotiate with the protestants prior to the hearing to resolve differences, but to date the applicant has not taken this step.

Question: Meeting attendees wanted to know who paid for the studies to demonstrate impairment.

Answer: Staff responded that the OSE pays for such studies, and often protestants hire their own experts as well. A participant asked if the state was planning to buy the San Agustin Plains water to fulfill its compact obligations in the Rio Grande. Staff replied there was no such plan.

Question: An audience member was particularly upset because the Socorro-Sierra Regional Water Plan had identified all possible sources of water and had concluded that the San Agustin Plains groundwater was not available because the OSE/ISC determined that it was connected to the surface flows in the Rio Grande. A participant asked why the OSE even accepted such an application given those conclusions.

Answer: Staff replied that it is very rare that applications are not accepted. The routine is for them to be evaluated for impairment during the hearing process. This is the process that is underway at this time. Staff reminded the group that the ISC in this case is one of the protestants.

#### Credibility of experts:

Question: A participant asked how the public could be expected to trust experts who are hired by one side or another.

Answer: Staff noted that it is the OSE's job to sort out for the state and make the final decision, regardless of experts hired by one side of the other.

#### Distinct nature of this region:

Concern: Participants wanted OSE/ISC staff to know that they fought to create a region separate from the Lower and Middle Rio Grande regions, believing that their interests were distinctly rural and agricultural and that these interests would be subjugated to the more powerful urban interests to the south and north.

### Agricultural data:

Question: Participants asked that the figures summarizing agricultural uses be broken down to show the amount for evaporation, riparian, etc. in order to have the data as accurate as possible. There was also a question on a fact sheet that was emailed prior to the meeting, but not distributed at the meeting. A participant who had received the fact sheet questioned a pie chart that showed dramatic increases in evaporation and decreases in agriculture in the year 2040.

Answer: Staff replied that they withdrew the chart because of its confusion resulting from the aggregation and synthesis of regional data. Staff hopes to have a clearer representation in the near future.

### Low flow channel:

Question: A participant asked why the low flow channel was not being used.

Answer: Staff explained that although use of the channel could save water, it was breached in accordance with the Biological Opinion (refers to the US Endangered Species Act) to provide water for the Southwest Willow Flycatcher below the San Acacia Diversion Dam. Some were distressed that an endangered species seemed to have a higher priority than water for human consumption.

## **Responses to the Four Focus Questions**

The group considered the four focus questions for public input on the State Water Plan Update.

### ***1. What should your region and the state as a whole do to assure water for a growing population?***

- Population limits: A participant suggested limiting population on the basis of water availability.
- Limits on development: High water using activities such as golf courses, high-density housing and water consuming industry should be limited.
- Domestic conservation: A participant suggested that the state promote domestic water conservation, such as the use of gray water, water harvesting, and xeriscaping.
- Preserve agriculture: Many urged the state to work toward preservation of agriculture as a means for meeting water needs of a growing population. There were fears that in order to meet their “public welfare needs” Albuquerque and others with money would take agricultural water from Socorro and Sierra Counties. Rural residents fear that public welfare may be defined as the public welfare of the state as a whole, or of the more powerful regions. It is not a matter of being paid for the water, it is a matter of not wanting to lose the water from the region, said one participant. Water planners in New Mexico would do well, said another, to look at the steps taken in eastern Colorado to re-vegetate dried up land with native species and to insure that the “last guy on the ditch” receives his delivery of water. Another noted that graphics often do an injustice to agriculture with percentages and figures of water consumption that do not tell the whole story.

- The group strongly urged the OSE/ISC to not allow transfers out of the basin.
- Drinking water supply buffers: A participant recommended aggressive protection of drinking water sources, both surface and ground, from point source pollution.

**2. *What water conservation strategies would help meet increased constraints (population growth, climate variability) on water in your region and the state as a whole?***

- Support agriculture: Some promoted the concept that agriculture naturally conserves water, and that support for agriculture will be beneficial to conservation. A participant said use the right amount of water in order to produce the most economic, profitable crops. Too much water, like too little, will hurt production. A farmer said that since he had laser-leveled his field, lined ditches and installed drip irrigation, he uses two-thirds of the water he used previously.
  - Many spoke of the need for incentives, subsidies and tax breaks to help farmers make conservation changes in their practices. Conservation must make sense economically, they said, or the farmer cannot afford to make water-conserving changes. A participant explained that the Ryan-Cervantes bill for agricultural water conservation has been signed into law and can help farmers with conservation strategies.
  - Finally, farmers observed that as long as water saved is water lost there is little reason for farmers to conserve. A participant said that House Joint Memorial 1 supports research to quantify agricultural water savings. Another expressed concern that those who have already conserved will be penalized when additional conservation measures are instituted. If an ordinance required reduction of water use by 15% and the resident or farmer had already reduced consumption, they could be required to reduce another 15%.
- Channelize the river: Irrigators recommended that state could channelize the river for more efficient delivery.
- Restore watersheds: A participant urged agencies to clean up and restore watershed and forest lands to produce more useable water.
- Reduce evaporation: Another suggested storing water in reservoirs in the northern part of the state, rather than in Elephant Butte.
- Penalize waste: Those who waste water anywhere in the state should be penalized, said one participant. Low flow toilets, water saving appliances, xeriscaping should be the rule, and enforced as necessary.
  - A major water waster, observed the group, is New Mexico Tech, which waters vast areas of lawn in the middle of summer in the

middle of the day. Some suspected that the motive for such practices was to preserve the water right, in other words, to “use-it-rather-than-lose-it.”

- Education and research: Another farmer asked state agencies to undertake research and development on conservation strategies. He asked agencies to share important research with those using water on the ground, so that the farmer could learn the latest conservation strategies and be able evaluate them for local use.
  - Although all ages need to be educated about saving water, a participant suggested that the focus be on school children, in order to eventually change behavior in the state.

**3. *Have you observed climate variability (e.g. drought, flooding, severe storms) in your region? What should be done to prepare for these extreme circumstances in your region and the state as a whole?***

- Drought constant: Some participants observed that the drought and extreme weather conditions have always been part of the region’s landscape. One said he had seen no change in flood and drought patterns in 50 years.
- Strategies to cope with drought:
  - *Farmers*: In 2003, farmers had to pump groundwater to irrigate fields. Farmers have been responding to the demands of water scarcity for years, irrigating at night, for instance. Establishing local water banks to help farmers through periods of drought is a strategy supported by many in the region. Another suggested that land could be taken out of production, or crops rotated, or perhaps supplement wells used. Farmers asked for a plan for the use of these contingencies.
  - *Urban users*: To meet the shortage from climate variations, some suggested mandating low flow devices, the use of gray water, drip irrigation, and xeriscape, and supporting those mandates with tax credit or cost-sharing programs.
  - *OSE/ISC*: A participant asked the OSE/ISC to implement the Active Water Resource Management (AWRM) administration of priority rights in times of shortage, and to do so in a way that includes the region in the development and implementation.
- Elephant Butte evaporation: There was general resentment that this region’s water plan is expected to account for all the evaporation at Elephant Butte, although, as OSE/ISC staff explained, the regions to the north on the Rio Grande are equally responsible for the evaporative loss.

**4. *What water projects are needed in your region? How should these projects be prioritized for funding?***

- Non-native phreatophyte removal: Many support the removal of non-native species and replacing them with native vegetation.
- Ditch lining: Although some supported ditch lining to conserve water, others pointed out that it is costly (\$34.50 a foot) and that there are riparian impacts that should be considered.
- Programs to assist farmers: A participant identified federal and state programs that are available to help farmers, including Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) and Soil and Water Conservation loan programs. OSE/ISC staff noted that there can be unintended consequences to some conservation strategies. In Artesia, for example, an increase in pumping resulted in less water in the Pecos, which impacted the state's compact delivery to Texas.
- Channelizing: Some encouraged the state to channelize the river and the upper lakes above Elephant Butte.

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