

Water Assembly Background

Regional Water Planning in the Middle Rio Grande

The Water Assembly is a 501(c)(3) non-profit corporation formed in 1997. The Assembly's purpose is to ensure effective implementation of the Middle Rio Grande Regional Water Plan through an open, inclusive, and participatory process so as to achieve a sustainable water future that balances water use with renewable supply in accordance with the stated goals of the Plan and in the common interests of the people and stakeholders in the region.

Made up entirely of volunteers, Assembly members self-select one of six broad interest groups:

- Agricultural Business and Production Group
- Cultural and Historic Water Use Group
- Environmental Preservation and Improvement Group
- Industrial, Institutional and Business Group
- Residential Water Use Group
- Technical Specialty Group



Delegates from each interest group are selected annually to serve as the Board of Directors, which provides guidance to the Executive Committee, which carries out day-to-day operations.

Since 1997, the Assembly has led water planning efforts in the Middle Rio Grande, an area that encompasses Sandoval, Bernalillo and Valencia Counties. In partnership with the Mid-Region Council of Governments' Water Resources Board, and with some of the funding from the New Mexico Interstate Stream Commission, which oversees regional water planning statewide, the Assembly completed a comprehensive water plan for the three counties, plus a sub-regional plan for the Rio Puerco and Rio Jemez basins, in 2004. The plan was accepted by all local governments in the region and by the New Mexico Interstate Stream Commission

An unparalleled and intensive public involvement process informed the creation of the water plan.

- Six rounds of Community Conversations in each of the three counties to allow citizens and planners to dialogue throughout the process
- Facilitated Regional Forums to reach consensus on critical plan elements such as mission and goals
- Public Opinion Surveys to record regional preferences on a wide range of water issues
- Expert scientific analysis and modeling of water supply, demand, scenarios and proposed alternative actions
- Interaction with governmental and non-governmental organizations to promote the flow of information
- Annual Assemblies to inform the public on plan progress and obtain input on next steps

Water Plan Highlights

To begin the process, a water budget was developed by a large and diverse technical team. The budget showed that annual demand exceeded renewable supply by 20% -- enough water each year to fill a football field 9 miles deep. Our Regional Water Plan documents this shortfall. As a result of the extensive public process, strategies to balance our Water Budget were approved.

To address the gap, the plan contained forty-three recommendations, some of which were:

- o Promote conversion to xeriscape
- o Promote rainwater harvesting
- o Convert to low-flow appliances
- o Reuse greywater
- o Reuse treated effluent
- o Enforce water use regulations
- o Measure all water use
- o Develop watershed management plans
- o Continue comprehensive, integrated water use planning
- o Pursue adjudication and water rights settlement
- o Level irrigated fields
- o Upgrade agricultural conveyance systems
- o Convert to low water use plants
- o Develop new water supplies
- o Restore native bosque
- o Implement education programs

Implementation

The Regional Water Plan is advisory, not a directive. Since 2004, many of the Recommendations have been implemented -- at least to some extent. As a region, however, the Plan has yet to reach full potential. To accomplish this will likely require increased public awareness and education, incentives, policies, publicity, ordinances, laws, regulations, taxes, water rights purchases, pricing, and other means of managing the consumptive use of water within the region. Additional studies and projects that could enhance water supplies may also be required.

Known Flaws in the Water Plan

At the time the plan was accepted, several parts were known to be incomplete or insufficient because of schedule or resource pressures. Some of them were:

- o Absence of Progress Metrics
- o Absence of Drought Plans
- o Ambiguities in Public Welfare Statement
- o Insufficient Tribal Involvement
- o Lack of water rights adjudication
- o Recommendations Not Well Quantified

Flaws in the Planning Process

Similarly, there were several institutional and/or historical constraints which prevented the plan from being more robust. Some of these obstacles included:

- o Inter-Regional Inconsistencies
- o Synchronization with State Water Planning
- o Legal Issues and Obstacles
- o Lack of Funding for Implementation
- o Diffuse and/or Ambiguous Responsibilities

Why Does Planning Matter?

Following the acceptance of the plan, improvements have been made to our management of water for the region. However, the deficit is roughly the same, improved knowledge as to the impacts of climate change is projecting reductions in surface water supplies, and potential consequences of inadequate or poor planning have become more acute. Such consequences could include:

- o Rio Grande Compact non-compliance (or cost to comply)
- o Wet water requirements not backed with water rights
- o Federal control of water (due to ESA or Compact issues)
- o Escalating costs of water
- o Interminable legal battles (tribal, interstate, intra-state)
- o Loss of traditions, communities, industries, economies
- o Disconnect between land use planning and water availability
- o Unforeseen impacts of unregulated claims to deep saline water

The draft 2014 Water Budget Update shows that we have a similar shortfall as in 1999, but we have picked the low-hanging fruit. Plus we are experiencing climatic changes projected years ago, resulting in less surface water supply.

Water Assembly Activities Since Development of the Plan

One way to implement our plan is to educate the public through straight talk about water issues in the Middle Rio Grande. Every year, we have put on assemblies and forums such as:

- Urgent Shortfall Reality: modeling shows shortfalls in meeting the Rio Grande compact deliveries
- Desalination: Silver Bullet or Pipe Dream
- Subprime Water Crisis: to close the gap, what will you give up?
- Aquifer Recharge Storage and Recovery: Boon or Boondoggle
- Climate Disruption and Our Water Future - Mitigate, Adapt or Suffer - A Call for New Strategies.

Assembly members worked on a monitoring & implementation plan; hosted annual Rio Grande Compact Forums; and participated in a variety of water-oriented activities such as the Upstream/ Downstream Workshops aimed at fostering dialogue between neighboring water planning regions. The Assembly continues to support local and state efforts to improve water policy. The Water Assembly provided advice to the ISC/MRCOG Regional Water Plan update process. Just getting underway, the Assembly is a partner in the Middle Rio Grande Basin Study, a part of the Bureau of Reclamation's WaterSMART program.

More information can be found at www.WaterAssembly.org.