Water Assembly Background
Regional Water Planning in the Middle Rio Grande

The Water Assembly is a 501(c)(3) non-profit corporation made up entirely of volunteers, self-selected into six broad advocacy groups:

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

Delegates from each advocacy group are selected annually by the general membership to serve as a governing Board of Directors, guiding an Executive Committee for 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. 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. The next steps are implementation of the recommended actions. This may include 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:

- Absence of Progress Metrics
- Absence of Drought Plans
- Ambiguities in Public Welfare Statement
- Insufficient Tribal Involvement
- Lack of water rights adjudication
- 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:

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

Why Does Planning Still Matter?

Following the acceptance of the plan, improvements have been made to our management of water for the region. However, the deficit has not gone away, improved knowledge such as climate change have surfaced, and potential consequences of inadequate or poor planning have become more focused. Such consequences could include:

- Rio Grande Compact non-compliance (or cost to comply)
- Federal control of water (due to ESA or Compact issues)
- Escalating costs of water
- Interminable legal battles (tribal, interstate, intra-state)
- Loss of traditions, communities, industries, economies
- Disconnect between land use planning and water availability
- Unforeseen impacts of unregulated claims to deep saline water

Water Assembly Activities Since Development of the Plan:

Annual Water Assembly's topics have included the 'Urgent Shortfall Reality' (coping with the possibility of compact non-compliance); over-allocation of the basin's water supply; the pros and cons of basin adjudication, the 'Subprime Water Crisis', the unfulfillable promises to provide water; and a review/evaluation of how far we have come. Assembly members also worked on a monitoring & implementation progress plan; began hosting an annual Rio Grande Compact Forum; and participated in a variety of water-oriented activities such as the innovative Upstream/Downstream Workshops aimed at fostering dialogue between neighboring water planning regions. The Assembly also supports local and state efforts to improve water policy, and encourages education and research with programs such as The Water Award annually at the Regional Science Fair and this year's ongoing Futures Project

www.WaterAssembly.org