

# “The Story”

## 2025 ... A Water Prophecy?

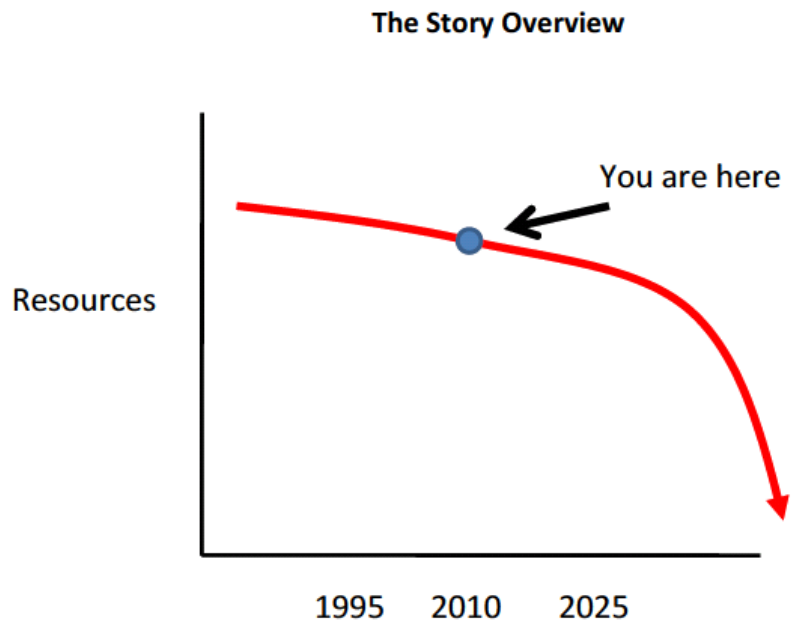
### Introduction

In the fall of 2009, the Middle Rio Grande Water Assembly found itself facing a problem: how to truly engage the public and policy makers in charting a course to a sustainable water future. A regional water plan produced five years earlier had helped, but we realized we needed to do more to capture people’s attention and spark their imaginations in a world of data overload.

The story that follows is the result. We believe it presents a plausible picture of what that future may look like if we continue on our current path – with no new policy changes.

In developing the story we enlisted a group of experts in the fields of hydrology, economics, environment and other disciplines to consider current trends and provide assessments and forecasts based on their areas of expertise. Factual support for the story, as well as additional story elements, can be found in their contributions, which will be summarized in during the Annual Assembly and are posted on our website.

These same experts also developed a graphical representation of our current trajectory relative to overall resource use, depicted here.



Although some may disagree with specific details in the story, its point is not to provide an iron-clad forecast of future events. The objective, rather, is to prompt a regional conversation about where we’re headed and what we can do to choose a different path. As our narrator from the future observes, the topic of that conversation needs to be broader than just water; it needs to be about our “way of being” in the world.

We look forward to having that conversation.

Kevin Bean, President  
Middle Rio Grande Water Assembly  
May, 2010

## A Future Story: The Middle Rio Grande - 2025

It is said that the best sight is hindsight. And if we only knew then what we know now. With that in mind, let us take a journey into the future... a possible future, and very likely a plausible future for the middle Rio Grande.

By stepping into the future and taking action now, we can take advantage of hindsight before it becomes too late and we find ourselves wishing we knew now what we will know then... in the year 2025 ...

As early as 1997, there was proof that we were living on borrowed time, as far as how much water our lifestyle required. Planners warned in 2005 that the region was grossly in debt. But it was an invisible deficit, occurring underground, and so it was easy to deny. We pretended we could just keep chugging on our maxed-out credit card.

The Hopi might call it Koyanisqattsi: Life out of balance.

The problem wasn't some simple mismatch between supply and demand. The problem was with our way of being in the world.

We made the mistake of relying on legal guarantees of water and of thinking that "low-hanging fruit," like water conservation would carry us through tight times. Bellies full, we were confident of harvest, and of maintaining the status quo without much effort.

We didn't recognize (or simply couldn't admit?) that absent some very big changes in our relationship to other resources, especially energy, modest improvements to the wildly inefficient way we used water would never be enough.

No one wonders these days when the "big drought" will arrive. Successive years of inadequate precipitation, juxtaposed with bouts of nasty flooding along our erratic river, have indeed shown us the folly of planning based on averages rather than extremes. Call it climate change, variability, a "ragged transition to a drier climate regime," or just plain fate — something certainly altered the range of conditions we had come to expect. What people took for normal — especially during those gung-ho years between 1971 and 2000 — was in fact an extraordinarily wet interlude across the arid southwest.

Those same high-rolling decades were even used as a baseline upon which we projected the cheerful picture of future growth.

And not only were 20th Century residents enjoying more rain and snow than had been common in the region over millennia, but technology had provided us with liquid affluence of another kind: The Feds punched a hole through the Continental Divide so that a fraction of the mighty Colorado could gush annually into the Rio Grande.

Every living thing that photosynthesized, swam, slithered, soared, grazed, or toiled around on four wheels capitalized on that surplus moisture.

Populations mushroomed. Irresponsibility prevailed. A sense of entitlement ruled the day. And we lost sight of a terribly important caveat to settling in the desert: The more there is, the less you need; the less there is, the more you are at risk.

The first problem -- once climate refused to live up to our expectations — was that all our eggs were in the ‘holding back snowmelt’ basket. We had a string of reservoirs designed to store and release spring runoff for use in the dry months. And suddenly there was damn little snow.

Nevertheless, we were obligated by countless treaties and documents to send water down the river, even if it meant turning off the tap on everything in the central valley, lining parts of the river, and pumping groundwater solely to feed the river.

As if that weren't pain enough, torrents could arrive capriciously. And at inconvenient places — four inches in a single hour at Lemitar, where there was no hope of utilizing the dividend. The old rules imposed so many legal proscriptions against ponding runoff and harvesting rainwater that we just stood by and watched it ravage the landscape. Feast or famine, as they say, and we were prepared for neither.

The government paddled in all directions. For a decade, factions had spent way too much time arguing about whose fault it was, as though humans have anything to say about when and where rain falls! Meanwhile, a century's worth of infrastructure was falling apart. You never knew where the next two-story sinkhole was going to open up. The legislature consumed what money there was to fund itself through special sessions to deal with crises it couldn't afford.

Then things really got bad.

For three years, there was almost nothing in the way of moisture. In 2017, the Middle Rio Grande Conservancy District curtailed 1,000 freaked-out water bank irrigators for the first time ever.

Rio Grande Community Farm's popular Corn Maze had to be imaginatively engraved in blow sand.

Swathes of bottomland cottonwoods turned terminally brown, along with holdout suburban lawns and all the turf at Albuquerque's two remaining golf courses. That was the summer the National Guard trucked water to thousands of valley homeowners dependent on domestic wells. And Albuquerque's San Juan-Chama diversion had nothing to suck but sediment.

Propped up by a Federal contract, the pretense of a ‘perpetual supply’ from the Colorado River lingered for another season, but for all intents and purposes, Azotea Tunnel would never run again.

Soon the Utility Authority and other power brokers couldn't supply all those faraway subdivisions — the ones with charming names like Mariposa and Mesa del Sol — couldn't spare the water, nor afford to pump it uphill. The infamous Rio Puerco Desalination Plant (once hailed as the salvation of Sandoval County) shut down almost before it opened due to lawsuits brought by downwinders who feared contamination from airborne arsenic.

But hands down, the most frightening manifestation of escalating temperature and scant rain were the wildfires.

The mountains burned first.

We got used to seeing the forests shaded High Fire Danger Yellow on the daily weather maps. And one after another, their unhealthy densities were reduced to ash.

Next it was the valley we obsessed about. Urban wildfire crews conducted relentless community patrols from January to November, hoping to avert the disaster that was inevitable.

At eleven-thirty a.m. on the first day of March, a 70-mph wind whipped one tiny, anonymous flame through the paper-dry grass beside the inert river. By three o'clock, it had hoovered through a mile of strip malls on Coors Boulevard and launched its offspring into the cheek-by-jowl tract homes of subdivision after subdivision on the unfortunate West Side, where there was insufficient water pressure to fight it, and forty years worth of hasty pressboard to feed it.

Actually, the Paseo Fire was the second suburban fire after the debacle at Matthew Meadows — where emergency equipment was denied quick access to the blaze by one of those locked gates that protect elite neighborhoods from ditch traffic. Ironically, these were the same homeowners previously concerned about high insurance premiums for building in the floodplain.

The fallout from the “Summer of Seventeen” was epic. In order to fulfill promises to serve urban interests, the State Engineer was even planning to foreclose on thousands of acres of non-Indian farmland still clinging to life in the middle valley. Senior water right holders watched their entitlements be reallocated to junior users, and they mounted an airtight “takings” case against the state for failing to provide the previously guaranteed constitutional protection.

Because of water shortages, the State Engineer required cities and towns with relatively junior rights to limit water use to the bare necessities. The municipal water utilities responded by imposing severe penalties on customers whose use exceeded their ration. Grass, save soccer fields, was the first loser. Urban trees came shortly behind, requiring the disposal of hazardous deadwood. This forced migratory birds to hold their conventions elsewhere. Of course, welfare costs escalated with the increasing unemployment of agricultural industry personnel. Businesses were no longer interested in relocating here. The other side of that was a reduction in the population growth rate, but not by enough to curtail growth in water demand.

After all this, as unlikely as it might have seemed in the days of the Silvery Minnow, environmentalists adopted the revolutionary view that farm land was the backbone of regional sustainability. They piled into the fray, and the legislature was stormed with groups demanding that the questionable pumping permits of all non-completed subdivisions be vacated, and that ecosystem needs, once and for all, be promoted ahead of speculator greed.

To ice that enormous cake, an unprecedented federation of mid Rio Grande Pueblos emerged, acting with a prudence born of centuries of surviving in the desert. This federation decided it was wiser to grow food than to lease tribal water to the Albuquerque Bernalillo County Water Utility Authority, and the sound of shattered municipal illusions could be heard up and down the valley...

It is said that the best sight is hindsight. And if we only knew then what we know now. The future story you just heard is what we could face in the year 2025. Unless... we use the wisdom of what we know now before it becomes too late.