

# MIDDLE RIO GRANDE WATER ASSEMBLY

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

We embarked upon a “Futures Project”. The story overleaf is the result of the first phase of that project. We believe it presents a plausible picture of what the future will look like if we continue on our current path.

In developing the story we enlisted a group of experts in the fields of hydrology, economics, environment and other disciplines to consider current trends – no new policy changes - and provide assessments and forecasts based on their areas of expertise. One of the most compelling products they developed in support of the story was a graph depicting our current trajectory relative to overall resource use. Titled “The Story Overview,” it appears below. Additional support, along with a full description of the Futures Project, can be found on our web site.

**The Next Phase** - Although we are confident the story, in a general sense, accurately describes what may lie ahead, we reject the notion that there’s nothing we can do to change the outcome. We are the authors of our fates, and the purpose of the telling is to prompt a conversation about where we’re headed and what we can do to craft a different story... and thereby choose a different path.

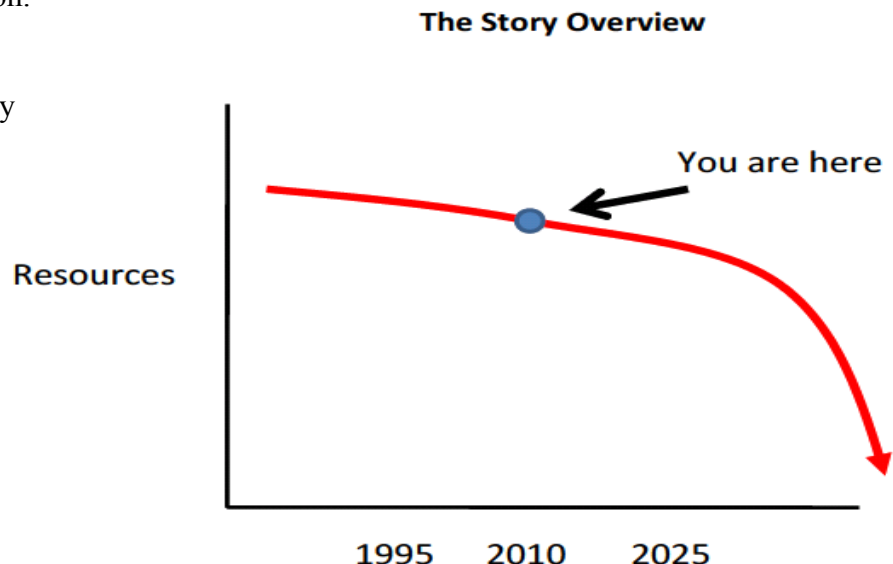
In the coming weeks we will initiate the conversation by publicizing the current story and by assembling a story-writing team (or teams) to create alternative stories – based upon new policy actions. We need prominent academics, businesspeople, elected officials and other leaders to participate on those teams to ensure the broadest possible representation and community buy-in.

The Assembly is a regional water planning group, but as we begin it’s important to keep in mind, as our narrator from the future points out, that the subject of our conversation needs to be much broader than water; it needs to be about our “way of being” in the world.

We look forward to that conversation.

Kevin Bean, President  
Middle Rio Grande Water Assembly  
January, 2011

[www.WaterAssembly.org](http://www.WaterAssembly.org)



## The Middle Rio Grande in 2025: A Retrospective

As early as 1997 there was proof we were living on borrowed time. Water planners warned the region was grossly in debt, but it was an *invisible* deficit, occurring underground and easy to deny.

We pretended that conservation and legal guarantees would suffice, knowing that the real problem was bigger than that. The Hopi might call it Koyanishqatsi: Life out of balance.

No one wonders these days when the “big drought” will arrive. 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.

The Feds added to that apparent affluence by punching a hole through the Continental Divide and diverting a portion of the mighty Colorado into the Rio Grande.

Every living thing capitalized on that surplus moisture. Populations mushroomed. 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, and suddenly there was damn little snow. Nevertheless, we were obligated to send water down the river, even if it meant turning off the tap on everything in the central valley.

As if that weren’t pain enough, torrents could arrive capriciously and at inconvenient places. Feast or famine, as they say, and we were prepared for neither.

Then things really got bad. For three years, there was almost nothing in the way of moisture. In 2016 the Middle Rio Grande Conservancy District curtailed 1,000 freaked-out water bank irrigators for the first time ever. That was the summer the National Guard trucked water to thousands of valley homeowners whose wells bottomed out and Albuquerque’s San Juan-Chama diversion had nothing to suck but sediment.

Soon the water 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.

But hands down, the most frightening manifestation of this new reality was the wildfires.

The mountains burned first. One after another, their unhealthy densities were reduced to ash.

Next it was the valley we obsessed about. Urban wildfire crews patrolled from January to November, hoping to avert disaster. It wasn’t enough.

At eleven-thirty a.m. on the first day of March, 2017 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 on the unfortunate West Side. When the smoke finally cleared, more than a billion dollars of real estate lay in ruins.

The fallout from the “Summer of Seventeen” was epic. With rumors flying that the State Engineer planned to foreclose on thousands of acres of non-Indian farmland to free up more water, senior water right holders mounted an airtight “takings” case against the state. The ensuing shortages forced municipalities to limit water to subsistence uses. Grass, save soccer fields, was the first loser. Urban trees came shortly behind. Shocked by the desert’s return, many human transplants fled to better-watered pastures.

As unlikely as it might have seemed in the days of the Silvery Minnow, a revolutionary view of farmland as the backbone of regional sustainability brought environmentalists piling into the fray. With their agrarian allies they stormed the legislature demanding an end to bogus pumping permits and insisting that ecosystem needs, once and for all, take precedence over speculator greed. To ice that enormous cake, an unprecedented federation of mid Rio Grande Pueblos, acting with a prudence born of centuries of surviving in the desert, decided it was wiser to grow food than to lease their water for development, and the sound of shattered municipal illusions could be heard up and down the valley ...