

Commentary: Thirsty for answers

With one eye toward the sky and the other toward growth, it's up to us to plan for New Mexico's dry future

Ed Payne

Tuesday, June 5, 2007

Annual assembly

The Middle Rio Grande Water Assembly will hold its 11th annual meeting, "Growth, Ecology, Traditions: Not enough water for all," on Saturday at the University of New Mexico's Dane Smith Hall, from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Registration begins at 8:30 a.m. and includes a \$10 fee, which will cover a continental breakfast and lunch. For information, go to the Water Assembly's Web site (waterassembly.org).

Water watch

This article is one in an occasional series Insight and Opinion is running on water issues affecting New Mexico. The articles are being written by members of the Middle Rio Grande Water Assembly (waterassembly.org). Each article represents the opinion of the author. Other articles in the series are available on The Tribune's Web site at ABQTrib.com.

Today's byline

Payne is president of the Middle Rio Grande Water Assembly.

The Middle Rio Grande Water Assembly has a reputation for initiating dialogue on tough topics.

Even after completion of its Regional Water Plan, annual assembly subjects have included the urgent water-shortfall reality, over-allocation of the region's water and the pros and cons of adjudication.

At this year's annual assembly, we will consider what it's going to take to tighten our belts enough to balance the water budget.

Background

One of the assembly's first products was a regional water budget, published in 1999. With concurrence among numerous hydrologists, it showed a substantial gap - about 20

percent - between water demand in Sandoval, Bernalillo and Valencia counties and the middle basin's renewable water supply.

With the budget as a guide, citizens subsequently developed an array of alternatives to bridge the gap. These options formed the heart of the Middle Rio Grande Regional Water Plan, accepted by local governments and the state of New Mexico in the summer of 2002.

While conservation measures have certainly been undertaken, the gap is still with us. Since 1999, the area has added 80,000 new residents and plans for several large new communities that could double the population by 2050.

Agricultural lands are being retired, but the end result is often more water use, not less. The regional water plan did not address the water needs of the Rio Grande itself, nor those of the river's aquatic and riparian inhabitants.

Most troublesome of all, our planning strategies were based on the recent, unusually wet quarter-century, while warming climates may mean considerably less precipitation and a change when precipitation comes.

In short, the region does not have sufficient water to cover current uses, much less new ones.

Trade-offs needed

People value certain water uses over others. High on the list, according to several surveys, is water to keep the bosque vibrant, water to preserve farming, and clean water for indoor use. Given the regional deficit, all of these desires simply cannot be satisfied at the same time.

Saying what's preferable is easy. Now we need to ask the tough question: What will we agree to give up? The water resource is limited. To gratify one use-sector, we will have to trim or eliminate others.

From the viewpoint of each of the assembly's diverse advocacy groups, panelists on Saturday will identify tradeoffs geared to reduce their water consumption and speak to the likely impacts of those choices to close the gap. Attendees will then try to converge on a recommended set of value-based priorities, after weighing the consequences inherent in those selections.

You can participate in creating solutions. Now is a great time to get involved by ensuring that the Regional Water Plan is implemented.