

CONSERVATION

Like public welfare, conservation is another undefined criterion that the State Engineer is supposed to consider in the allocation of water. LWVNM has addressed conservation in its position on Natural Resources:

The League of Women Voters of New Mexico supports a strong state resource conservation policy. The state should provide leadership, set a public example in its operations, develop and enforce regulations promoting conservation, and actively educate its citizens.

There is general agreement that water is a scarce resource in New Mexico, meaning that there is a structural imbalance between an uncertain and variable supply and increasing demand. Taking conservation seriously implies confronting the physical limitations of our water resources, which would have immediate implications for the bottom lines of developers, growth-oriented communities, agriculture, and other major sectors of our economy. So there is still a strong official bias favoring supply-side solutions over demand management: building more diversion projects, tapping deep aquifers, transferring water out of agriculture.

Beyond the physical limitations, there are many social, political and legal issues that shape people's attitudes towards conservation. There is conflict between the view that access to water is a fundamental human right and economic theory that asserts that markets are the best way to deal with scarce resources, including water. Conflict is inherent between policies that exhort holders of existing water rights to use water more efficiently and policies that promote continuing population and economic growth. There is a conflict between the fundamental beliefs of those for whom a healthy ecosystem is essential to support human existence in the future and those who hold that technology and human ingenuity will be the most important

determinants of our future well-being. There are legal conflicts between those for whom water rights are intimately tied to the preservation of a traditional way of life or to local food security and those who believe that some of those rights must be disassociated from the land in order to support inevitable population growth in urban areas. There is intergenerational conflict because the principal beneficiaries of conservation today will be future generations of New Mexicans. And, more concretely, there is interstate conflict: Texas, which has already successfully sued New Mexico over the Pecos River Compact, has threatened litigation involving the waters of the Rio Grande.

Current residents of New Mexico may reasonably ask why we should sacrifice and use less water for the benefit of individuals or institutions with whose aims we disagree. Within the League, are there areas of agreement about the goals that should be served by conservation? Potential goals include: reducing net depletion; enabling compact obligations to be met; relieving stress on the physical system; improving agricultural efficiency to increase productivity or to sell the excess; allowing for economic growth.

What steps should our state and local governments take to accomplish our conservation goals? Should they develop incentives to align private and public goals? Require a binding water budget process with public participation? Invest in the development of accurate data to inform the water budget process? Are there other actions that could achieve the objectives?