

REGIONAL WATER PLANNING

New Mexico legislators initially called for regional water planning in the late 1980s to prevent the transfer of unappropriated water out of state, but by the time the 16 regional water plans were finally completed, between 1999 and 2008, the emphasis had shifted to addressing the gap between supply and demand.

Theoretically, the completion of a water plan could help a region to retain local control of its water by assuring compliance with interstate compacts. It could also ensure water for future generations while protecting property rights and preserving the values of the residents. However, the planning process will need to be improved to accomplish those goals.

To achieve a realistic water budget, the plans require adequate, accurate data describing the available groundwater and surface water, realistic population projections, and information about variables affecting the water supply, such as evaporation and climate change. In fact, in many parts of the state the aquifers have not been mapped, and acequias and domestic wells are unmetered. Flow requirements for endangered species are sometimes omitted and environmental impacts of development projects are ignored.

Although the plans were created with significant opportunity for public participation, they are not mandates. They include discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of the alternatives available to meet the demand, but they generally fail to choose options and plan for their implementation.

Inclusion of a project in the regional water plan is a criterion for funding by the Water Trust Board. However, there is no requirement for land use plans to defer to the water budget in the regional water plan.

Instead, many local governments assume that new supplies will be forthcoming as needed.

Among the regional plans there is a lack of consistency in terminology, units of measure and population projections. Because there was no collaboration between regions, there is also no consistency in planning for adjacent lands, even those within the same basin. For instance, Jemez y Sangre and Middle Rio Grande proposed to import water to help reduce deficits in supply. But the most accessible source of water rights, Socorro-Sierra, found that it cannot afford further extra-regional transfers.

Those three regions are jointly subject to the obligations of the Rio Grande Compact. The Compact specifies how much water must be delivered to Elephant Butte Reservoir as a function of how much passes the Otowi Gage near Los Alamos. The simulation study reported in the Middle Rio Grande (MRG) Water Supply Study completed by S.S. Papadopulos and Associates in 2004, found that even under year 2000 climate and development conditions there was an average annual compact debit of 40,000 afy. In addition, about 70,000 afy of groundwater were being removed from the aquifer. Thus demand already exceeds renewable supply in these regions.

According to the Papadopulos report, implementation of options in all three regional plans could reduce the average compact debit to 7,000 afy by 2040. However, this would require the retirement of 25% of MRG agricultural lands, among other things. Even with all these changes and assumptions (some rather optimistic), the debit would rise back to 40,000 afy under extended drought conditions such as might be produced by climate change.