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Navajo Settle.  
Oct. 23, 2007

# THE GREAT WATER GRAB ON THE SAN JUAN RIVER

by Mike Sullivan

Most people don't pay attention to the San Juan River, far off in the northwest corner of New Mexico. Some people don't realize that the San Juan contains 60% of all the surface water in New Mexico – more than the Rio Grande, the Pecos, and the Gila combined. And people don't realize that Governor Richardson has signed a proposed settlement that would give the Navajo nation 56% of the water in the San Juan River. If Richardson's deal goes through, it means that the Navajo nation will own one third of all the stream water in New Mexico. This means hard times for everyone else in New Mexico.

This huge deal was negotiated by administration officials in the absence of constructive comment from the water users that will be directly affected. According to Governor Richardson and State Engineer John D'Antonio, this deal is supposed to settle Navajo water claims in New Mexico, and provide water through a new pipeline to Gallup and Window Rock, Arizona. But it's not likely that the pipeline will ever be built, because it will cost more than \$1 billion, and the federal government doesn't have the money.

If the Navajo Nation gets all this water, most of it will be exported to Nevada, California, or Arizona. The tribe can lease the water to Las Vegas, Phoenix, or San Diego, just by letting it flow down the San Juan into the Colorado River. John D'Antonio claims that the tribe cannot export the water, but he knows better. Water is an article in interstate commerce, so one state cannot prohibit water from being exported to another. New Mexico learned this lesson when it tried to stop the export of water to El Paso.

Fortunately, the San Juan water grab is not a done deal. It still needs federal legislation, and a lot of federal money, plus a lot of New Mexico's water. This deal is opposed by the Department of Interior, the Bureau of Reclamation and the Office of Management and Budget. This back room deal needs to be sent back to the bargaining table, and farmers need to have a real voice in these negotiations.

(Mike Sullivan is a member of the Farm Bureau and the San Juan Agricultural Water Users Association)