



2009 State Water Plan Update Public Outreach

Region: Middle Rio Grande
Transportation Center
Los Lunas, NM
May 12, 2009

Summary of Discussion

Facilitator/Recorder: Seth Cohen

Welcome and Introductions

Gretel Follingstad, State Water Planner with the Interstate Stream Commission, welcomed the group of about 5 to this public forum sponsored jointly by the Office of the State Engineer and the Interstate Stream Commission (OSE/ISC). She introduced agency staff and contractors:

Rolf Schmidt-Petersen, ISC Rio Grande Basin Manager
Amy Haas, ISC Legal Counsel
Jess Ward, District I (Albuquerque) Supervisor
Karin Stangl, Planning and Communications Director
Maureen Haney, Communications Specialist

Presentation

Follingstad presented an overview of the New Mexico's state and regional water planning process including data on population, water supply and demands, and an overview of the Middle Rio Grande Regional Water Plan.

Questions and Comments on Presentation

Seth Cohen, contracted facilitator, took questions and comments from the audience on the presentation and other related water issues.

Comment: Janet Jarrett had very strong feelings about language in the presentation, stating that such terms as "water programs" or "water uses" are too general. She suggested the use of more specific terminology to educate the public. Terms including "depletion of the aquifer," "variable percentage in flow," and "re-charge," among others should be defined and explained to the public.

Response: Follingstad explained that ISC internal staff agreed to use the term "water use" because it is a comprehensible term for the general public. Follingstad noted that the majority of participants at statewide public outreach meetings are not familiar with the technical terminology used by regional planning committees.

Comment: Jarrett requested greater explanation of “conjunctive use.” She suggested that the ISC explain both ground and surface water resources as “a single supply.” Jarrett emphasized the state needs to build trust and credibility with people by using correct terminology and not underestimating people.

Comment: Jarrett felt the graph showing that 63 percent of water in the region is for agriculture is misleading. She feels the data needs to be broken down to represent all depletions, including riparian water use. Jarrett stated that 1/3 of the water is riparian use and 1/3 is agricultural use.

Comment: Jarrett said the Middle Rio Grande (MRG) region is very different from other regions and clarifying how the water is depleted, diverted and consumed in the valley are very important details.

Response: Follingstad explained that the intention of the presentation is to inform the public about the different sectors of water use and the respective percentages according the OSE Water Use and Conservation Report that is published every five years by the agency. This is the best internal data the agency has for the entire state. This information was presented because it allows for a standardized approach to every region across the state to reflect on how water is used in New Mexico. Follingstad acknowledged that the agency understands the vast differences between regions and the specific complexity of the MRG.

Comment: Jess Ward, the OSE’s District I Supervisor, supported the need to include data on depletions in the OSE Water Use and Conservation Report as well as to the public to create a better understanding of water use, especially in the MRG.

Response: Follingstad also supports the need to reflect depletions in the Water Use and Conservation Report and will discuss this with that program manager. Follingstad also noted that the ISC Upstream/Downstream project is taking depletions into account.

Comment: Jarrett felt the presentation didn’t reflect the data and information in the MRG regional water plan (RWP). She also didn’t agree with gaining public feedback from the four focus questions posed in the public meetings. She felt that undermines what the MRG RWP has already done. She stated the MRG RWP addresses the concerns of supply/demand gap, conservation, climate variability, and water projects. She emphasized that the SWP should address these issues and “mesh” them with what has been accomplished by the regions.

Response: Follingstad explained that the ISC and OSE were incorporating the regional plans into the SWP as part of our mandate from the SWP executive order. She also clarified that these SWP public outreach meetings are intended for all constituents of New Mexico to attend and become more informed about water for the state and within their region. The four focus questions are intended to gain input and feedback from many people who are not or were not, part of the regional water planning committees. There is no intention to undermine or discount the work already completed on the RWPs. In addition, the Water Use and Conservation Report data was used for all the regions because it is the only standardized and consistent data available for the entire state. Each regional water plan has a different degree of technical data, which is not consistent for all 16 regions. Using the Water Use and Conservation data was the only way to standardize our presentation for all regions.

Follingstad continued by reporting that these meetings have been very successful in getting more people involved in water planning across the state and gaining constituent feedback and ideas for the four focus areas of the SWP update. Follingstad also pointed out the maps and graphs presented show diversions because that is the data presented in the Water Use and Conservation report.

Comment: Rolf Schmidt-Petersen of ISC emphasized the importance of recognizing that the message is really the same between the ISC's State Water Plan and the regional plans, that supply doesn't meet future demand, and we need to start planning for our future. This is key and can be worked on to assure better understanding and collaboration.

Comment: ISC and OSE should collaborate with non-water state agencies, such as the Department of Agriculture, to show the connections between state agencies on water issues; the Department Of Agriculture is the likely channel of communication for farmers in the region and state as a whole.

Response: Follingstad and Schmidt-Petersen explained that this type of collaboration was already occurring within the Governor's Water Cabinet.

Comment: A participant suggested changing the law on how the gross receipts tax is used with regard to development, although he said it might be impossible at the moment.

Responses to the Four Focus Questions

The group considered the four focus questions for public input on the State Water Plan Update.

1. What should your region and the state as a whole do to assure water for a growing population?

- Population data: Concern with Bureau of Business and Economic Research (BBER) population figures were expressed and it was noted that the “accelerated rate to get to the population growth projection seems absurd.” Follingstad explained that the ISC uses this available data from BBER and that the data clearly reflects trends that may or may not reflect the actual reality of the future. The BBER population study, like economics, is part of the “softer sciences” and is based on human behavior trends. Schmidt-Petersen explained that the statistics from BBER might be alarming because they are higher than the projections in the regional plans. He also stated that one would arrive at the same results whether one uses recent or older population estimates, as long as the time period is the same. It is the difference in the time-gap between dates that determines the difference in the supply/demand gap.
- Significance of population data: New Mexico is already a fully appropriated state and that any increased growth presents a challenge. The ISC and OSE want to plan wisely for this growth and that is the reason for this public outreach.
- Protect the agricultural way of life: A participant was concerned about water availability due to increased growth, he expressed he wants to see his way of life as a farmer way and that culture preserved and

protected. The environment and resources like water are integral to this way of life. He said it was inevitable that the growth and the negative affects of that growth are coming. “The needs of many seems to outweigh the needs of a few,” he said. He noted that farmers really see themselves as having a function in the whole natural cycle of water distribution.

- Incentives for farmers: “Pay them what it costs them,” a participant said. Because farming is often a family business, it is a higher cost enterprise than large-scale corporate businesses. This makes it challenging for them to penetrate the markets.
- Supply/demand gap charts: There was some confusion regarding the first slide showing the projected gap between 2005 and 2040. Presenters explained there is a graph on the slide with one bar representing 2005 supply and the second bar representing 2040 demand. The next graph in the presentation clearly labels supply, demand and the projected gap.
- Land use: A participant explained that the county’s policy on land use follows water availability. Only 21 percent of the county is not controlled by federal and state government, or tribal lands. The county is telling developers to be certain of water issues. He noted that building permits can be controlled as a way to address growth. Most growth is in Albuquerque and in Bernalillo County. Growth is in decline in other areas of the Middle Rio Grande Region.
- Conservation tools: The state and region can work on water rate structures to encourage conservation.

2) *What water conservation strategies would help meet increased constraints (population growth, climate variability) on water in your region and the state as a whole?*

- Realize impact of any conservation measures: A farmer in the audience said that concrete ditches have worked wonders for saving water, but they have had adverse effects too, such as the loss of the once-vibrant asparagus growth in the area. The asparagus survived off ditch leakage.
- Invasive species should be targeted and eradicated: Weeds need to be controlled responsibly and not cut or removed when seeds are mature and can easily spread. Siberian elms are a huge problem.

- Update/replace old municipal systems: Old systems are expensive to replace, but there is a high benefit in conserved water and improved return flow to the river.
- Use it or lose it challenge: A participant referred to water law and the threat people feel to their water rights if they do not use them to capacity. ISC and OSE staff noted that there have not been any actual cases of users losing their rights due to lower use or lack of use. Nonetheless, those in attendance agreed that the threat of losing them in the law is a strong disincentive for conservation. There needs to be more outreach and awareness on this dilemma. ISC Legal Counsel Amy Haas, said a conservation statue is available for agricultural users, but that many people may not be aware of the statue.
- Protection of water rights: There are federal programs that protect water rights. It was noted that it is always good to document that it is not one's intent to abandon use.
- Global challenges: A participant reminded everyone that it is difficult to address conservation in general when peoples' survival needs are out of scale with the scope of what we are doing here. He cited clear-cutting in the rainforest as an example. How do we look at global interconnectedness?

3) *Have you observed climate variability (e.g. drought, flooding, severe storms) in your region? What should be done to prepare for these extreme circumstances in your region and the state as a whole?*

- Noticeable change in the climate: A participant questioned, "is it hot, dry, getting warmer," noting that he feels the cycles are difficult to predict, but that change is occurring. The link between CO₂ emissions and warming is apparent. The participant noted, as a farmer he is experiencing the warmer temperatures, and he can feel the increased strength of the sun in the fields.
- Poor development planning is occurring: A participant said homes are being developed in poor locations along the river valley that lead to erosion and flooding problems. Better planning needs to occur. Follingstad referred to potential collaboration with land-use planning to address this concern.

4) *What water infrastructure projects are needed in your region? How should these projects be prioritized for funding?*

- Using known strategies: A participant referred to the berm dam that pre-dates Cochiti Dam and how this impacted the river flow. He noted we should not ignore projects and programs that have been used and worked in the past, such as dams and levees.
- A participant mentioned a local desalination project proposal and said he is hopeful that the Water Trust Board will approve it.
- Maintain existing structures: Maintenance of major facilities and existing water infrastructure is critical. Water loss is currently significant.
- Septic tanks: A participant expressed concern about housing and septic tanks being too close. He does not want to encourage new development but feels a better system needs to be in place.
- Water quality improvement: Water quality has been poor in the region. Farmers have seen their fields die from contamination just one week after irrigating them.
- Land-management practices and policies: Participants discussed the temptation of agricultural landowners selling their rights for financial benefit, which leads to neglected and fallow lands.

Additional comments:

Follingstad thanked the participants for attending and contributing to the State Water Plan Update and reminded the group that there are a variety of ways to comment on the state water planning process, including visiting the OSE/ISC website, the comment form or by email. She then thanked everyone for their comments and their commitment to helping make the State Water Plan as comprehensive and useful as possible.

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