

GOVERNOR RICHARDSON'S STATEMENT ON GILA AND SAN FRANCISCO RIVERS

The Gila and San Francisco Rivers are the last wild and free-flowing rivers in the Southwest. New Mexico is a state with abundant natural resources, and these rivers stand out as crown jewels. I want to protect them for future generations. Therefore, there will be no planning with the objective of building a dam on the Gila or San Francisco Rivers initiated while I am governor of New Mexico. My representatives on the Gila-San Francisco Coordinating Committee (GSFCC) will project my policy of no planning encompassing any possibility of a dam.

Environmental planning in Southwest New Mexico – as in other parts of the state – must consider a range of alternatives. The 2004 Arizona Water Settlements Act (AWSA) provided the funding and terms under which the State of New Mexico may deplete an average of 14,000 additional acre-feet per year from the Gila and San Francisco Rivers. The AWSA provides \$66 million for projects to meet regional water demand, and a total of \$128 million if a diversion or dam project is undertaken.

In the 2007 New Mexico legislative session, I vetoed an appropriation of \$945,000 earmarked for “Gila basin water development.” I vetoed the appropriation because the language did not include the balance I felt it needed – that is, it appeared to presuppose that the funds would be used solely to support a diversion or dam project.

Nevertheless, the scientific ecological and hydrological research being undertaken by the GSFCC will provide worthwhile insight into how the system functions and how we might better protect its natural operation. I also support studies addressing demand management and alternative means of addressing demand in Southwest New Mexico. The analysis of water demand and supply will be invaluable in assessing alternatives when decisions are made on the expenditure of the \$66 million New Mexico is entitled to for water development under terms of the Arizona Water Settlements Act. That money doesn't become available until 2012, so we have ample time to conduct these studies.

The AWSA appears to permit the local communities, state, and region to meet water supply needs without maximizing the new depletion of water from the Gila and San Francisco Rivers. I am concerned about the impact that maximizing depletions will have on the river system. Going forward, I believe that a range of alternatives should be studied, with the “no diversion” option as an essential part of the analysis. To initiate the studies, I have allocated \$300,000 to the GSFCC and expect the committee to consult with other interested parties in setting priorities.

We must conserve the Gila and San Francisco River ecosystems in any strategy to meet future water needs in the region. While balancing the water needs of people and nature is always difficult in an arid state like New Mexico, the inestimable value of an unsullied Gila River environment must always be the top priority in considering New Mexico's course in response to the Arizona Water Settlements Act.