



For immediate release:

March 21, 2005

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Legislation to Provide for a Indian Water Rights Settlement Fund Heads to the Governor's Office

(SANTA FE, New Mexico) – Senate Bill 172, which would create an Indian Water Rights Settlement fund, passed through the House over the weekend and is now headed to the Governor's desk for signing.

The House approved the measure, which was sponsored by Sen. Carlos Cisneros (D-Questa), by a vote of 58 to 0.

The legislation calls for a special fund to pay the state's share of costs for projects for the non-Indian portion of water rights settlements with Indian Tribes and Pueblos. However, no money was appropriated for the fund next year.

"The time to begin planning ahead for these settlements is now," said Interstate Stream Commission Director Estevan López. "This legislation is important because it allows us to get feedback from the legislature about funding decisions for important settlements and to set aside the money for future appropriations when it will be necessary to implement these critical initiatives."

House Bill 126, sponsored by Rep. Ray Begaye (D-Shiprock), was the duplicate bill in the House, which died on the Senate floor when the session came to an end.

The Office of the State Engineer is charged with administering the state's water resources. The State Engineer has power over the supervision, measurement, appropriation, and distribution of all surface and groundwater in New Mexico, including streams and rivers that cross state boundaries. The State Engineer is also Secretary of the Interstate Stream Commission and oversees its staff.

The Interstate Stream Commission is charged with separate duties including protecting New Mexico's right to water under eight interstate stream compacts, ensuring the state complies with each of those compacts, as well as water planning.