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Op-Ed: Well Metering Requirements in Lower Rio Grande Seek to Protect Water Right Users and Manage Drought

by John D'Antonio, PE, New Mexico State Engineer

(SANTA FE, New Mexico) – The deadline for installing meters on wells in the Lower Rio Grande Water Master District is March 1, 2006, mere days from today. I issued the metering order December 3, 2004, giving well owners more than a year to comply. Most domestic and stock wells are exempt from the order.

My staff has been working to inform water users about the new metering requirements through press releases to area news media, presentations to various groups in the Las Cruces area, and by making information available at our agency's website and at the Las Cruces District Office. In December 2005, the agency mailed out 9,600 brochures to area water right owners. The brochure included information about the well metering rules and requirements, the state and local metering guidelines, meter vendors, how to install a meter and other resources.

I want to emphasize that failure to install a meter will not result in the loss of water rights, but it could make water right owners subject to repayment of water and financial penalties.

The metering order is part of a long-term effort to allow New Mexico to control its own water destiny. I am committed to this effort. It is my responsibility as State Engineer to protect and preserve existing water rights. The metering of wells, as one tool of Active Water Resource Management will assist me greatly in meeting that duty.

Metering in the Lower Rio Grande will help manage and administer the stream system, promote the expedited leasing and marketing of water, conserve water, and prevent over-appropriation. In addition, it will assist the Office of the State Engineer in effectively curtailing illegal diversions and over-diversions and to enforce water right priorities, if necessary.

Steps taken this year to implement the AWRM initiative will lay the groundwork for administration in both dry and wet years. If we don't work now to control our water future, the federal government or neighboring downstream state Texas could wrest that control from us.

(MORE)

The Lower Rio Grande Water Master District is one of seven areas throughout the state where I am focusing the Office of the State Engineer's personnel and resources for the AWRM initiative. In keeping with the AWRM process for each of these areas, a project team has been formed, a water master district declared, and a water master hired for the Lower Rio Grande. Next in the Lower Rio Grande, the Office of the State Engineer will enforce the metering order and prepare district-specific rules and regulations.

If you still have questions about metering, please contact the Lower Rio Grande Water Master Sheldon Dorman, at (505) 524-6161 or (505) 649-1480. You can also visit the Office of the State Engineer website at www.ose.state.nm.us, where metering information -- including our metering brochure -- can be accessed by clicking the link on the front page under "hot topics."

I know that the changes I'm putting in place may be challenging. I look forward to working with all of you to meet these challenges, and together design a successful water future for New Mexico.

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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.

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