



For immediate release:

March 24, 2006

For more information, contact:

Yvette Chavez
Public Relations Coordinator
Office of the State Engineer
(505) 765-2011

Mike Stauffer
Public Information Officer
State Tourism Department
(505) 827-7379

Erica Asmus-Otero
Public Information Officer
State Parks
(505) 827-1473

Dolores Maese
Acting Director
Public Affairs
U.S. Forest Service
(505) 842-3497

2006 Summer Recreation and Tourism Opportunities Plentiful in New Mexico Despite Severe Drought

(ALBUQUERQUE, New Mexico) – A record-breaking dry winter brought state and federal agencies together at a joint news conference today to inform the public that severe drought conditions will impact outdoor recreation in 2006, but that numerous opportunities will still be available throughout the summer.

State Engineer John D'Antonio, Secretary of Tourism Mike Cerletti, State Parks Deputy Director Tommy Mutz, and U.S. Forest Service Deputy Regional Forester Abel Camarena provided a summary of 2006 runoff and projected reservoir levels, an outlook on the wildfire season, and information on recreational opportunities that will abound in the state despite the drought.

"This past winter was an extremely dry one for New Mexico – the second driest in 112 years," said State Engineer John D'Antonio. "In contrast to the exceptionally wet season we experienced last year, precipitation across the state from November 2005 to February 2006 ranged from well below average to none – meaning this summer is projected to be the driest the state has seen in the absence of a good monsoon season."

Although late winter storms in March added snowpack that may improve runoff slightly, the few storms will not make up for the low winter precipitation. Water supply forecasts predict runoff in most of New Mexico's major river basins to be well below normal to near-record low. However, officials maintained that excellent recreation conditions will be available this summer, and the optimal time for people to visit the state's reservoirs will be between Memorial Day and the July 4 holiday.

Abiqui, Cochiti, Navajo and Ute lakes all should be at 80 percent of the authorized capacity throughout the summer. Santa Rosa Lake will remain at the 70 percent through early July. The Rio Grande, Pecos, and Cimarron basins will not fill much this spring and will be drawn down to low levels by mid- to late-summer. Elephant Butte in particular will be hard-hit by the low spring runoff with levels of 230,000 acre-feet by July 4 and 70,000 acre-feet by Labor Day.

"The good news for the state is that two of New Mexico's biggest and most beautiful lakes, Navajo and Ute, will be terrific again this year," said Tommy Mutz, Deputy Director of New Mexico State Parks. "While we can't make it rain and snow, we can continue to improve facilities and programs—and State Parks has more in store for the public than ever."

(MORE)

Some of the new measures, programs, and facility improvements offered by State Parks in 2006 include increasing the length of stay at state parks from 14 to 21 days, a 3-for-2 camping coupon, a new access road at Morphy Lake State Park, the opening of an observatory at Clayton Lake State Park, and the launch of the "Sundown Cinema" Program – which will use a new 26 x 14 foot inflatable movie screen to show movies in the state parks this summer. A complete list of summer events can be found on the State Parks website at www.nmparks.com.

In addition to the limited precipitation around the state, dry winds and fire fuels have increased fire danger concerns, prompting the Southwestern Region of the U.S. Forest Service to pre-plan firefighting resources in advance of what could be a challenging fire season.

"We are working closely with our federal, state, and local agencies to assure that clear and timely information about our fire situation is easily accessible to New Mexico residents, public lands' visitors and users," said U.S. Forest Service Deputy Regional Forester Abel Camarena. "New Mexico's national forests, referred to by many as, 'America's Great Outdoors', offer diverse outdoor recreational experiences. As we plan our activities this year we ask that everyone take personal responsibility to protect the public lands they love. For the next few months, we urge everyone to 'do your part, don't let a wildfire start.' Fire prevention is the key to protecting our communities and our public lands from wildfire."

Even though the New Mexico is experiencing drought and wildfire concerns, New Mexico Tourism Department officials continue to work around the clock to ensure that numerous attractions will be offered around the state.

"Even before Governor Richardson declared a state of drought in New Mexico, the New Mexico Tourism Department was committed to helping the tourism industry deal with the effects of drought and possible fire conditions this summer," said New Mexico Tourism Department Secretary Michael Cerletti.

To make sure that residents and potential out-of-state visitors are informed of the ever-changing conditions in New Mexico, the Tourism Department recently redesigned their website to fill the 'information gap,' with daily updates from the U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management and the Public Lands Information Center. The website is located at, www.newmexico.org/nmoutdoor06.

"We make it a priority to keep New Mexico residents and potential out-of-state visitors informed about the ever-changing conditions. Remember -- New Mexico is the fifth-largest state in the country, with millions of acres of hiking, backpacking, stream fishing, bicycling, soaring, balloon rides, camping, golfing, horseracing, and gaming," said Cerletti. "We encourage all to come and share this special time of year in the Southwest's favorite playground."

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.

U.S. Forest Service – "Caring for the Land and Serving People"

The mission of the New Mexico State Parks Division is to protect and enhance natural resources, provide recreational facilities and opportunities, and promote public safety and education to benefit and enrich the lives of our visitors.

#