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Op-Ed: State Engineer's Goal is to Protect and Preserve Water Rights Files

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

(SANTA FE, New Mexico) – I would like to take this opportunity to quell some fears that have surfaced about my agency's need to temporarily move paper water rights files from our Roswell District Office to our Albuquerque District Office. We want to assure the public that our agency shares their concern for the safety of this information and we have taken all precautions to ensure the integrity of the files. The Hondo Basin is not being singled out, we have successfully performed this task in other basins throughout the state and have improved the process every step of the way.

As part of our Active Water Resource Management initiative, the Lower Pecos and specifically the Hondo Basin have been targeted as a priority to the Office of the State Engineer. With this priority designation comes the need to abstract (analyze) these files as part of the adjudication process as well as helping the agency efficiently administer the water resources within the basin.

The purpose of moving these files is to allow our Water Administration Technical Engineering Resource System (WATERS) staff to begin abstracting the Hondo Basin paper water rights files and entering them into the WATERS database. This process involves sorting each of the files, comparing them to the files in Santa Fe to make sure they are consistent and complete, analyzing the file and imaging it to enter into the WATERS database. Upon completion of this process a paper copy of the file will be stored in our archive in Santa Fe and in addition **the original will be returned and placed on file once again in our Roswell District office.**

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We looked at the prospect of moving the process down to our Roswell office but it would prove to be a costly operation and not in the best interest of the New Mexico taxpayer. As a result, I have instructed my staff to stay on schedule with our agency priorities and follow through with the abstraction process as planned.

The WATERS project serves a critical function within the Office of the State Engineer and allows our agency to be accountable to the Legislature, the Governor and the public. We have made great progress with our WATERS database and the population of it with data from paper files located at other district offices around the state. Once this process has been completed, not only will there be paper copies of the files available, but they will also be stored electronically which will serve to make these files even more easily accessible.

The final product will be a complete set of organized files that have been professionally abstracted and imaged through well-developed quality control procedures. Records will be accessible over the Internet with the ability to query for desirable information and receive reports specific to the individual queries.

Finally, the information on the decades-old paper documents will be electronically preserved and protected from risks associated with fire, flood, theft, loss, deterioration or any other calamity.

I would like to assure the public that during this abstracting and imaging process, the WATERS group will make every effort to satisfy reasonable requests for documents from the Roswell District office in a timely manner and keeping the integrity of the files preserved.

I urge everyone in the Roswell District to support our WATERS staff as they work as quickly as they can to process these files. They are working hard to do what needs to be done to help effectively administer New Mexico's precious water resources, and to ensure the integrity of the files and their safe return to the Roswell District office.

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