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Active Water Resource Management in the Lower Rio Grande Basin: A Year End Message From The State Engineer

by John R. D'Antonio Jr., P.E., New Mexico State Engineer

(SANTA FE, New Mexico) – In 2007, we made significant progress with the Active Water Resource Management (AWRM) initiative in the Lower Rio Grande Water Master District and in the six additional high priority basins statewide. I wanted to say a few words about what we have achieved this year and what lies ahead for 2008.

My AWRM initiative allows us to put the tools in place to effectively manage New Mexico's water resources, protect senior water right users, and to meet state line deliveries to downstream users.

Statewide progress to date has included hiring of more water masters in all of our high priority basins, more money for our metering efforts, and integration of water administration information through our WATERS program. In addition, the challenge to my general framework AWRM regulations has resulted in a New Mexico district court decision that confirms my authority to administer water rights statewide and allows us to move forward with regulations specific to each of the high priority basins.

In the Lower Rio Grande, one of the major accomplishments is the success of our metering program. There are now a total of 1840 metered wells in the Lower Rio Grande Water Master District, which represents 85 percent compliance. We expect to reach 100 percent by the start of the 2008 irrigation season. [gl1]As this program is being implemented, our efforts are focused on ensuring compliance with the metering requirements, preventing illegal diversions, over diversions and waste.

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We have also made significant progress in the status of our district-specific rules and regulations. During several public meetings, listening sessions, and workshops in the local area, we received many comments, which my staff continues to read and consider as we develop the final draft of the regulations. The period to submit comments before the beginning of the formal adoption process was extended to allow ample time for public input and ended on September 1, 2007.

As we move forward into 2008, the district-specific regulations will be adopted incrementally. Initially, our focus will be predominantly on the jurisdiction and duties of the water masters. Towards this end, I have hired a second water master for the basin and will be hiring two assistant water masters in January. This team will allow for the efficient monitoring of water use in the region on a daily basis.

Subsequently, our focus will be on priority administration and alternative administration as proposed by local water user entities. A guiding principle of water administration in the Lower Rio Grande is to establish sensible limits on groundwater pumping to protect the aquifer and its ability to function as a drought reserve. I continue to encourage water users to come together and formulate their own alternative administration plans that incorporate local needs and conditions.

This past year also saw the publishing of operating procedures by the United States Bureau of Reclamation that implement Elephant Butte Irrigation District's assurance of a state line delivery guarantee from its surface water allocation.

The objective of AWRM is to protect the water rights of New Mexicans. I encourage everyone to continue to be part of the public process. My agency has made tremendous progress in 2007 and will continue to work hard in the New Year to secure a sustainable water future for the citizens of New Mexico while continuing to meet our downstream deliveries to other states.

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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