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## **Op-Ed: New Mexicans' Support for Omnibus Public Land Management Act Legislation Will Benefit New Mexico Communities**

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

**(SANTA FE, New Mexico)** –There are several reasons for New Mexicans to support the Omnibus Public Land Management Act that is pending consideration by the Congress during the “lame duck” session scheduled for next week. The Omnibus bill contains a bipartisan collection of more than 150 individual bills relating to water and land management issues in several states. Important legislation in the Omnibus bill for New Mexico includes the Northwestern New Mexico Rural Water Projects Act, which is a major component of the State of New Mexico’s settlement with the Navajo Nation, and legislation authorizing the Eastern New Mexico Rural Water System, which will provide drinking water for eastern New Mexico communities.

Passage of the Omnibus bill will be beneficial to New Mexico for several reasons. Authorization of the settlement agreement between the Navajo Nation and the State of New Mexico will complete one of the most important stepping stones necessary to resolve the Navajo Nation’s water rights claims in the San Juan Basin in New Mexico. The water supply project authorized by the legislation will include a pipeline to transport clean, safe drinking water to Navajo and non-Indian communities such as the City of Gallup that currently do not have a reliable source of water and to individuals who currently rely on hauling water home after purchasing it from coin-operated machines located several miles away.

Improvements to the quality of life for the Navajo people and other citizens of Northwestern New Mexico will benefit all New Mexican citizens, as will providing certainty with respect to the Navajo Nation’s water rights claims in the San Juan Basin. Without

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certainty, the Navajo Nation's water rights claims could impact other water users in New Mexico, including citizens in our largest metropolitan communities like Albuquerque and Santa Fe that plan to utilize water imported from the San Juan Basin for their future drinking water supplies through the San Juan-Chama Project.

The Northwestern New Mexico Rural Water Projects Act creates the Reclamation Water Settlements Fund that will provide funding to the Department of the Interior and the Bureau of Reclamation to construct or rehabilitate water supply infrastructure, restore fish and wildlife habitat and improve environmental conditions relating to the Navajo Settlement and other settlement agreements that require federal legislative approval. The Reclamation Water Settlements Fund will also be used to fund other Indian water rights settlements in New Mexico and in other states.

The Omnibus bill also authorizes the Bureau of Reclamation to assist water users in Eastern New Mexico with the design and construction of the Eastern New Mexico Rural Water Supply Project that will provide residents in the Eastern New Mexico communities of Clovis, Portales, Texico, Melrose, Elida and Grady and Curry and Roosevelt Counties with safe, reliable drinking water to supplement or replace the diminishing ground water supplies on which those communities currently rely.

A water supply is currently available from Ute Reservoir, but water treatment and conveyance facilities still need to be constructed before that water can be used. The participating eastern New Mexico communities should be commended for their efforts at planning for their future water supply needs in the face of the declining Ogalalla aquifer, and now is the appropriate time to enact the federal legislation necessary to complete the water supply project for those communities.

Relating to the Rio Grande, the Omnibus bill includes legislation authorizing the repair and rehabilitation of irrigation infrastructure for the Middle Rio Grande Pueblos, which should lead toward additional water conservation in the Middle Rio Grande region, and legislation confirming the City of Albuquerque's ownership of the Albuquerque Biological Park property that includes the Rio Grande Botanical Garden, Tingley Beach, the Zoo and the Aquarium, which has been a point of contention in the region for several years.

The Omnibus bill also includes bills relating to other communities around New Mexico, including legislation authorizing the U.S. Geological Service to conduct a survey of New Mexico's aquifers to assess the quantity of groundwater that may be available for human use.

Passage of the Omnibus bill will provide a huge step forward toward addressing some of the largest challenges facing New Mexico's future with respect to water related issues. All of our citizens should support the passage of the Omnibus Public Land Management Act next week.

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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.*

**709 total words**