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Bhasker Rao Retires as Pecos Bureau Chief for the Interstate Stream Commission Staff

(SANTA FE, New Mexico) – Completion of the first project for New Mexico's new Strategic Water Reserve, negotiation and implementation of the Pecos River Settlement, and consistent compliance with New Mexico's interstate stream compact requirements for water deliveries to Texas on the Pecos River are three major accomplishments achieved by Dr. Bhasker Rao as Pecos Bureau Chief for the Interstate Stream Commission staff.

Dr. Rao began working with the Office of the State Engineer as a Water Resource Specialist in the Hydrology Bureau in December 1983. He was promoted the next year and continued to earn promotions throughout his career. In 1997, he assumed the duties of the Pecos Bureau Chief for the Interstate Stream Commission and will retire from that position on March 30 after more than 25 years of service to the citizens of New Mexico.

Dr. Rao's education included bachelors of science and masters of science degrees in civil engineering. He has studied the philosophy of engineering and holds a PhD in hydrology and water resources, as well as achieving licensure as a professional engineer.

"Bhasker is an excellent engineer and hydrologist, as well as being a good manager and a very good negotiator," said Interstate Stream Commission Director Estevan López. "His quiet confidence and meticulous work ethic have been great assets to the Pecos Bureau and to the ISC as a whole. We will miss him."

Under Dr. Rao's watch, the Pecos Bureau always complied with the Pecos River Compact and the related US Supreme Court Decree obligations to deliver a portion of the Pecos River water to Texas. The consequences of noncompliance would have been economically devastating to the economies of the Pecos River Valley and New Mexico. During Dr. Rao's tenure as chief of the Pecos Bureau, the State of New Mexico not only complied with the annual compact and decree obligations but also helped build a record high water delivery credit of 92,500 acre-feet as of the end of 2008. This credit will provide a significant buffer, making it easier for New Mexico to achieve compact compliance during future drought years.

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Dr. Rao has been instrumental in working to implement the Pecos Settlement. This project will ultimately involve acquisition of the water rights associated with18,000 acres of farmland, construction of well fields and pipelines to deliver 20,000 acre-feet of water per year to the Pecos River to augment natural flows and transfer of the acquired water rights to the well fields. He is the only state person who has been involved through the entire settlement process – from initial efforts to form a committee of water users; to development of a consensus plan; to seeking legislative funding and negotiating the settlement with the Pecos Valley Artesian Conservancy District (PVACD), Carlsbad Irrigation District (CID) and the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation; and finally to implementation of the Settlement. To date, about $64 million have been spent on Settlement implementation since 2005 and the implementation phase is about 98% complete. This project will assure long-term compliance with the Pecos River Compact and Decree, provide additional water supplies to the CID and protect junior groundwater rights in the PVACD from the threat of a priority call.

Dr. Rao and his staff also foresaw the need to provide water for the protection of threatened and endangered species without which, water that is dedicated for other uses in the basin could be in danger of being taken and used for compliance with the Endangered Species Act (ESA) under federal law and court mandates. As soon as the New Mexico Strategic Water Reserve Act was passed and funded, Dr. Rao and his staff were ready with a project to make water available for ESA compliance. The so-called Vaughan Conservation Pipeline Project was conceived, designed and implemented within a period of less than two years. This was the first Strategic Water Reserve project in the state. This project is great example of how state and federal agencies can work together to assure compliance with the ESA while not harming compact compliance efforts by the state or water rights of private water users.

The ISC's other strategy for dealing with the threat of the ESA on water management has been to develop better science for both hydrology and biology, so that ESA water demands truly reflect what is required for the protection of the species and is feasible given the hydrologic and institutional settings for water resources in the Pecos Valley. Through Dr. Rao's foresight and input from specialists from other disciplines such as law and biology, a strategic research program was developed. As a result, two scientific papers related to the life cycle of the threatened Pecos bluntnose shiner and water operations in the Pecos River have been published in peer-reviewed journals. This research led to a lower water requirement for the adequate protection of the listed species.

Development of the Pecos River Decision Support System (PRDSS) is another of Dr. Rao's initiatives that has been completed and used successfully for critical decision-making both in the Pecos Settlement and in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) for projects in the Pecos River Basin. This suite of inter-connected computer models include two ground water flow models (the Roswell Basin model and the Carlsbad Basin model), a river operations model (RiverWare model of the Pecos River) and a data processing tool that makes all three models talk to each other. This effort has been a great success and provides a useful management tool for the water managers and decision makers.

The nine-member Interstate Stream Commission is charged with protecting New Mexico's right to water under eight interstate stream compacts, ensuring the state complies with each of those compacts, as well as investigating, conserving, and protecting the waters of the State, in addition to water planning.

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