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Opinion-Editorial: The Gila Water Settlement is Good for New Mexico

by Bill Hume, Planning and Policy Director, Office of Governor Bill Richardson

(SANTA FE, New Mexico) – It seemed in some ways to be counter to the flow of history when President Bush in December signed a bill that allocates a minimum of \$66 million and possibly as much as \$128 million for water development in Southwest New Mexico. Included in the massive Arizona Water Rights Settlement Act, the funding is for development of up to 14,000 acre-feet per year of new water supplies to meet water supply demands in the Southwest Water Planning Region of New Mexico, including costs associated with planning and environmental compliance activities and environmental mitigation and restoration.

There has not been a major reclamation project built within New Mexico since the completion of the San Juan-Chama Development Project in the 1970s. The Animas-La Plata project, under construction in southern Colorado, is the last major project serving New Mexico water interests.

But now New Mexico has negotiated successfully for the resources necessary to make major improvements in water availability for Southwest New Mexico. Governor Bill Richardson is pleased that we were able to accomplish this with the help of our Congressional delegation. It is Richardson's longstanding policy that we must build the New Mexico economy while preserving its natural beauty and ecology. To that end, it is his expectation that the process for determining the best use of these assets will become a national model for coordination and cooperation between water needs and environmental concerns.

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The Age of Reclamation -- the building of massive works to harness the flow of water to serve man's needs -- came to an end back in the 20th Century. That was true because for the most part the projects with reasonable cost-benefit ratios have all been built. But, costs aren't the only moveable element in that ratio. The population of the United States is expected to increase by 33 percent in the next twenty-five years. The majority of that increase is expected to migrate into the southwest states. As the demand for water to serve growing populations continues to increase, the anticipation of a renaissance in water project construction grows across the West.

I attended a recent water supply workshop in Salt Lake City sponsored by the Western States Water Council, an adjunct organization to the Western Governors Association. State engineer after state engineer stood up and spoke of the need for additional water storage and delivery capacity in their state. Populations are outstripping supplies.

It is often observed of military leaders that they plan for the next war based on the experiences of the last -- and are caught by surprise when something entirely different arises. We all -- environmentalists, government leaders and water engineers -- should be on guard that we don't behave similarly as the pendulum swings back toward a construction phase on water development.

When the Bureau of Reclamation was established in 1902, it was charged with the development of water resources and flood protection needed to open the West. Catering to the needs of an expanding agrarian economy was the focus. And Reclamation did its work well. Reclamation water works originally intended primarily to supply agriculture are in service to this day -- only increasingly their water is being diverted to municipal and industrial uses.

But there was a cost to that progress. We belatedly came to realize that the alterations of the flow of the rivers of the West had major consequences on the ecology of those streams. That realization contributed to the passage of the Endangered Species Act and the National Environmental Policy Act -- both designed to give environmental considerations their rightful place in the design and planning of major human projects. We have spent a lot of energy and resources in trying to correct the environmental consequences of past reclamation works. The ongoing effort to restore the habitat of the Rio Grande silvery minnow is an example close to home.

But the acrimony that too often has characterized these environmental remediation struggles need not be the defining characteristic for the future. It will serve both the water needs of the human population and the environmental needs of the landscape if we can avoid the polarity of the 20th Century as we move into the new era. It is a given that the Endangered Species Act and the National Environmental Policy Act sit astride the path from concept to construction. Projects in the 21st Century will go forward (or not) in one of two ways:

--Environmental interests and development interests will lock in combat in court, in the political process and in the court of public opinion. One side will win, one side will lose -- and a staggering sum of taxpayer and public interest money will have been expended in settling on a skewed decision. Or,

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--Water development proponents and environmental advocates will analyze and plan jointly to design projects that give the best compromise of benefit to man with minimum harm to the environment.

Different states and projects will follow different paths from concept to construction or abandonment. In New Mexico, we will follow the consult and collaborate model -- and the implementation of New Mexico's Arizona Water Rights Settlement options on the Gila River will be the first example. There will be no project built on or near the Gila River without full environmental analysis and consultation. That is a requirement of federal law -- but it will also be a mandatory prerequisite of state policy.

The governor is committed to that. The Interstate Stream Commission is committed to that. The funding New Mexico receives from the Arizona Water Rights Settlement Act starting in the next decade will be spent in ways to preserve and improve the ecology of the Gila River in New Mexico as well as to make additional water resources available to the communities in the watershed.

The classic age of reclamation is history. The new age of reclamation will start in New Mexico on a new path of cooperation. Henceforth, both economics and ecology have a place at the table.

On January 17th the Interstate Stream Commission will conduct a public briefing on the Gila Settlement in Silver City from 7:00-9:00 p.m. at the Grant County Administration Center. After presentations on the settlement, staff will answer questions and take public input on how to proceed with the planning process. It is important that all of Southwest New Mexico is represented at that meeting, from water users to environmentalists to agriculture to the general public. I encourage everyone to attend.

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(For more information on the public meeting, contact Beth Salvas at (505) 764-3870, in Albuquerque.)

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