



Water Wise Community Brief

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Summer Recreational Opportunities Still Exist Despite Drought and Low Reservoir Levels



State Engineer John D'Antonio talks about reservoir levels as former Tourism Secretary Fred Peralta (left), and State Parks Director Dave Simon (right) look on.

conference on March 5 in Albuquerque where they revealed projected spring reservoir levels and snowpack runoff.

"State agencies are working together to plan for continued drought. We felt it was important to deliver this message now, so recreational enthusiasts and recreation-based businesses can prepare," said D'Antonio.

"Although reservoir levels are down and snowpack levels are lower than usual for this time of year, we are still predicting a recreational season this summer, especially at Elephant Butte, Navajo Lake, Abiquiu, and Ute Lake. At Elephant Butte, this means recreational enthusiasts need to know that opportunities for boating, fishing, and water skiing will be optimal between Memorial Day and Fourth of July. By Labor Day, we are predicting water



News media turn out for news conference

in the reservoir to be at very low levels," he said.

"Our agency already has taken steps to maximize flow into our state's largest reservoir, Elephant Butte, by constructing the Pilot Channel, an 18-mile-long constructed river channel through the old reservoir delta. This effort has cost our agency more than \$5 million to date to make sure water flow is unobstructed coming into the reservoir," he said.

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2004 State Legislative Update

The clock ran out before more than 70 bills dealing with water issues could be acted on during the 30-day 2004 Legislative Session. Some bills would have provided new tools for managing water during continuing drought conditions. Others would have helped meet the mandates of the State Water Plan.

Three water bills, followed closely by the Office of the State Engineer, made it to Gov. Bill Richardson's desk to be signed into law.

The Governor signed a bill to provide a means for permitting

legitimate uses of livestock ponds while controlling non-livestock, recreational, and aesthetic ponds. The bill (SB 301), was sponsored by Sen. Ben Altamirano (D-Silver City) and provides for specific measures for the regulation and control of surface water uses, which were exempt under current statutes. It also removes loopholes and exclusions for the use of surface water for livestock purposes while protecting ranchers and other water right owners who have legitimate claim to the water.

Other legislation signed into law (SB 313) allows electric generation



companies to use water from oil and gas drilling for cooling purposes. PNM, Public Service Company of New Mexico, supported the legislation and plans to use produced water at San Juan Generating Station near Farmington, which could potentially save thousands of acre-feet

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Work Continues on Elephant Butte Pilot Channel

As the drought focuses more attention on water in our state, government agencies are coming together to work on cooperative solutions. The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation (Bureau) and the Interstate Stream Commission (ISC) have launched a joint river channel excavation and maintenance project, called the Pilot Channel in the area formerly occupied by the reservoir. Since 1999, with drought reducing inflow to the reservoir and with farmers below Elephant Butte Reservoir calling for annual irrigation deliveries, the reservoir has receded south more than 18 miles, exposing a delta of mud, water, and skeleton salt cedar trees. Work on the Pilot Channel continues.

ISC Project Manager Chris Stageman said he makes trips to the site regularly to monitor the channel.

"Keeping this channel functional is critical for our state's compact deliveries and to provide water to New Mexicans south of the reservoir," said Stageman. 💧

Benefits of the Pilot Channel

- ◆ **meeting compact obligations** -- The Rio Grande Compact specifies that Elephant Butte is the point at which New Mexico delivers water to Texas. It is critical to convey water efficiently through the delta to the reservoir. Any lack of connection between the river and reservoir can contribute to significant under-delivery of water that must be provided to meet compact obligations.
- ◆ **minimizing evaporation** -- An excavated and maintained channel significantly reduces evaporative loss.
- ◆ **maximizing water delivery** -- The channel aids in the delivery of water to the reservoir, helping to maintain the water level for recreational enthusiasts and providing water to New Mexicans and Texans living south of Elephant Butte Reservoir in the Rio Grande Valley. (Although Elephant Butte is New Mexico's compact delivery point to Texas, fifty-seven percent of the Rio Grande Project supply of water is used in-state to provide water for New Mexico's farmers.)



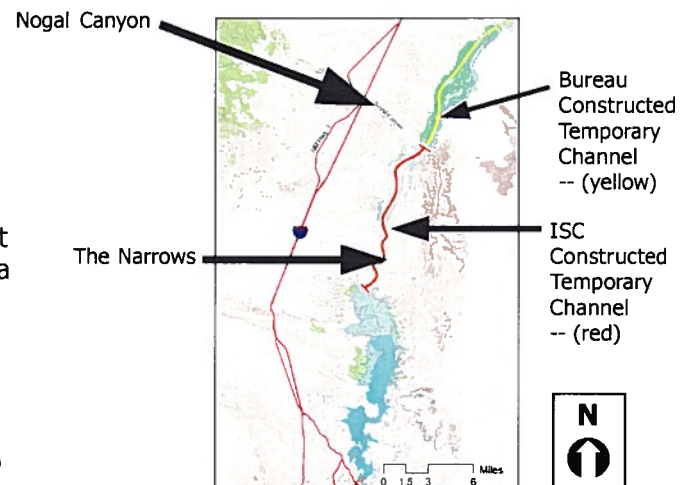
Aerial view of Pilot Channel in April 2003



Aerial View of Completed Pilot Channel in February 2004

History of Work

- ◆ **2000** - The Bureau began construction of a 7.5-mile channel with a downstream end at Nogal Canyon, following several years of design and coordination with other agencies as well as environmental permitting.
- ◆ **2002** - When the reservoir pool was projected to recede further, the Bureau with ISC assistance obtained environmental permits to work between Nogal Canyon and the downstream end of the area called the Narrows. The Bureau issued license agreements to the ISC and the ISC hired Wilco Marsh Buggies of Louisiana to excavate and maintain 11 miles of the channel.
- ◆ **2003** - The Bureau continued construction of the 7-mile section of channel on the northern end of the reservoir to be 240 feet wide and 2 feet deep. Wilco Marsh Buggies constructed a 4.5-mile section to a 150-foot width and 2- to 4-foot depth from Nogal Canyon to the ponded area. Since June 2003, the ISC effort focused on completing a 50-foot channel through the ponded area and on removing obstructions through the Narrows. It was completed in October of 2003.
- ◆ **2004** - Plans for future work in the area by the ISC staff include ongoing maintenance of the channel downstream of Nogal Canyon to its full design specifications, construction of 8 to 10 additional miles of channel south of the narrows, and maintenance of both, will depend on available funding.



Map of Elephant Butte Pilot Channel

State Water Plan Enters the Implementation Phase



Governor Richardson's news conference in Santa Fe.

Governor Bill Richardson accepted the New Mexico State Water Plan at a news conference in January 2004. The plan is the culmination of work by agency staff that began in April 2003 after the Governor signed the comprehensive water legislation.

The plan was approved by Interstate Stream Commissioners on December 17, 2003.

"This plan will provide a policy framework for the Office of the

State Engineer and the Interstate Stream Commission to manage water issues and prioritize funding needs around the state in coming years," said State Engineer John D'Antonio.

"We want to thank all the individuals and organizations who contributed their time and effort toward the creation of this plan," said Interstate Stream Commission Director Estevan López. "Now the work begins on implementation of the

plan, which will include making progress on effective management of water during times of drought, continuing adjudications, entering information into the Water Administration Technical Engineering Resource System (WATERS) database, making progress on settling Native American water rights cases, developing new water sources, and continuing the progress made with the Endangered Species Collaborative program."

The State Water Plan is a culmination of 29 public meetings held around the state. More than 1,500 people attended the meetings, which involved citizens from



2003 State Water Plan

232 New Mexico communities and featured in-depth discussions on key water topics such as water banking, drought management, shortage sharing, watershed restoration, strategies for water conservation and other issues.

The State Water Plan is available for review on the website for the Office of the State Engineer, at www.ose.state.nm.us

Employees Bowl for Charity

In the interest of helping the children of New Mexico, and in pursuit of the First Lady's Traveling Trophy, employees from the Office of the State Engineer dusted off their bowling shoes and participated in the Bowl for Kids' Sake fundraiser. The event was sponsored by Big Brothers/Big Sisters of Santa Fe on March 14.

The five teams representing the

agency were: The Reservoir Dogs, Pin Heads, Pura Agua, Sink or Swim, and Aces and Queens.

Employees from Santa Fe and Albuquerque raised over \$2,000 for the organization. Big Brothers/Big Sisters is a non-profit organization that works to help young boys and girls achieve their potential through positive adult relationships.



Bowlers strike a pose in their spare time.

Earth Science Day at the Rotunda

Along with other state agencies and organizations, the Office of the State Engineer recently had an opportunity to showcase the agency's work at the annual Earth Science Day at the State Capitol Rotunda on January 30.

The event focused on teaching children, teachers, parents, and

legislators about land and water issues that affect New Mexico.

More than 25 employees put together the event and staffed the agency's booth. Special thanks goes out to those volunteers.



Hydrographic Survey Bureau Chief Mark Fesmire and Gar Clarke of the Information Technology Bureau inform students of the water distribution process in New Mexico.

of water per year in the San Juan Basin area.

A third bill signed, (SB 87), creates a fund within the Water Trust Board to allow money to be donated to help fund acequia programs.

Other significant legislation that died during the session, which will likely be re-introduced in 2005 includes:

- ◆ SB 89/HB 196 to give the State Engineer the authority to deny new domestic wells in areas facing groundwater shortages.
- ◆ HB 102 to increase domestic well applications fees from \$5 to \$200. (The bill would have allowed money to be used to buy water rights to offset river depletions and better monitor well use.)
- ◆ HB 312/SB 360 to create a state-owned water reserve to help meet interstate compact deliveries and to use for endangered species obligations.
- ◆ SB 200/HB 101 to allocate \$1.3 million to hire technical personnel for water rights adjudications statewide and \$400,000 to help state courts expedite cases. 💧

The New Mexico State Parks Division continues to take steps to ensure that park visitors have access to lake shores, marinas, and boat ramps. As water levels drop, work continues to extend and improve existing boat ramps and to extend access roads to shorelines and marinas.

"Optimistic runoff forecasts indicate that at least three boat ramps at Elephant Butte will be operational through June," said Simon. "Farther north, Navajo and Ute lakes are expected to remain at least 75 percent full through the summer. Heron, El Vado, and Conchas lakes should have plenty of recreational water through spring and into early summer."

State Parks spent more than \$800,000 to improve boat ramps at Elephant Butte, Heron Lake, and Navajo Lake since January 2003 said Simon.

This year, the Division plans to spend another \$600,000 on ramps at Elephant Butte, Eagle Nest Lake, and Conchas Lake. That includes \$400,000 at Conchas and \$30,000 to build a brand new ramp at Eagle

Nest. The Division also is working with marina operators at Elephant Butte Lake to move their operations to deeper water if necessary.

"Although water sports are clearly some of New Mexico's more popular summer recreational pursuits, the state offers so much more," said Peralta. "New Mexico is still a perfect vacation escape for families and friends for adventure, sports and recreation: hiking, mountain biking, golf, fly fishing, spelunking, ballooning, sailing, hang-gliding, cultural attractions, national monuments, museums -- the list is endless."

The State Engineer also talked about prospects for this year's irrigation season.

"The state's irrigators are already aware, based on their experiences over the past several years, that this drought is severe," said D'Antonio. "Based upon the most recent snowmelt runoff estimates, it appears a drought will continue in most areas of the state this irrigation season with several areas running short of water after the peak snowmelt runoff." 💧

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Make every drop count!

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