



Planning New Mexico's Water Future

[By John Fleck](#)

Journal Staff Writer

Drought has a way of focusing the conversation.

Monday was Albuquerque's 62nd consecutive day without measurable precipitation, tied for eighth-longest on an all-time list not at all worth celebrating.

The most recent forecast called for just 52 percent of average flow on the Rio Grande into Elephant Butte Reservoir. But that was a month ago. March's warm, dry winds seem to have stolen a big chunk of what meager snowpack we had, ensuring that the new forecast, due later this week, will be worse.

In a normal year, we're living beyond our water means in New Mexico. This is not a normal year.

That makes the timing perfect for two events later this week in Albuquerque that will bring together people thinking hard about how to accommodate our growing water needs in an increasingly parsimonious desert.

Friday, the Utton Center at the University of New Mexico Law School hosts a daylong conference on the disconnect between land use planning and water policy in New Mexico.

Saturday, the Middle Rio Grande Water Assembly will hold a seminar exploring "aquifer storage and recharge," a new water management approach being considered to help sustainably manage New Mexico's scarce water supplies.

The land use-water connection — or lack thereof — has long been a problem.

"How do we integrate local, state and regional water plans with local land use plans to support the sustainability of communities, protect the environment, and ensure our economic vitality?" the Utton Center's organizers ask in an introduction explaining the purpose of Friday's discussion.

In a white paper discussing the issue, Utton Center Director Susan Kelly and a group of colleagues note that New Mexico state law assigns the responsibility for water administration to state agencies, while delegating land use decisions to county and city governments.

"There is little structure for coordinating land and water management between the two levels of government," they wrote.

Since the 1990s, state law has required county governments to submit subdivision proposals to the Office of the State Engineer to review, to see if there is an adequate long-range water supply for the development. But county governments are then free to ignore the review and allow the subdivision to be built, even if there is not enough water to meet its residents' long-term

needs.

There is no similar requirement for developments in incorporated cities.

Beyond that, Kelly and her colleagues note, there are many lots laid out long ago in old subdivisions in the Rio Grande Valley where home construction is permitted regardless of available water supplies. And state law allows a homeowner to drill a municipal supply well, no questions asked, something that has been widely done in the Middle Rio Grande Valley.

The solution to meeting urban water needs has long been to simply pump more groundwater. But that is catching up with us. Santa Fe and Albuquerque have concluded that approach is not sustainable, shifting to extensive use of imported Colorado River water through the Buckman Direction Diversion (Santa Fe) and San Juan-Chama Drinking Water Project (Albuquerque).

But even that may not be enough.

One alternative management strategy, being considered by both Albuquerque and Rio Rancho, involves an effort during times of plenty to return water to the aquifer beneath the metro area via a technique called "aquifer storage and recovery."

In times of excess — either during the winter when usage is low, or during unusually wet years — extra water could be pumped into the ground, where it would be stored and then extracted later.

The Albuquerque Bernalillo County Water Utility Authority has tested the idea with a water-recharge project in Bear Canyon, in Albuquerque's Northeast Heights. Officials say the test was successful at returning modest amounts of water to the aquifer, and Albuquerque is considering making it a permanent program for the storage of excess water in the winter, when the city's consumption is low.

Albuquerque also is pursuing a larger version of the project, although its future is unclear because of questions about funding. Rio Rancho also is pursuing a similar strategy.

But there are questions about whether it is a good idea, as suggested by the title of the Water Assembly's Saturday forum: "Aquifer Recharge, Storage & Recovery: Boon or BoonDoggle?" The issues surround the energy and economic cost of storing and then later recovering the water, said Elaine Hebard, the organizer of Saturday's forum.

UpFront is a daily front-page opinion column. Comment directly to John at 823-3916 or jfleck@abqjournal.com. Go to www.abqjournal.com/letters/new to submit a letter to the editor.