

Coping with the Urgent Shortfall Reality

Summary of the Presentations on the Urgent Shortfall Reality - Kevin Bean, Chair of the Public Participation and Outreach Working Team, Middle Rio Grande Water Assembly



Elaine Hebard: For those of you who weren't able to come to yesterday's session, Kevin Bean, Chair of the Public Participation and Outreach working group, is going to give us a brief summary of the presentations on the Urgent Shortfall Reality

Kevin: I thought we had a number of excellent speakers. They were divided up into two sections that ran from about 1:30 to 4:30 in the afternoon. The first section was a description of what we're calling the Urgent Shortfall Reality, and it was followed by implications of the USR. Vince Tidwell of Sandia National Labs presented the computer model that is largely the basis of projections we're using regarding what's going to happen with the compact in the Middle Rio Grande. Jim Bartolino, of USGS, talked about the hydrologic reality of the basin as Bambi Meets Godzilla: Bambi dancing around in the forest having a good time, while the reality is Godzilla, in the form of what we know today about our actual water resources. I think Bambi Meets Godzilla is not just a good metaphor for what we have as far as water resources, but for the kinds of decisions we're going to have to make in the Middle Rio Grande in regards to protecting the aquifer and meeting compact delivery requirements. Those are the two primary objectives and there's an unresolved question about how we're going to do both. Rolf Schmidt-Peterson of the Interstate Stream Commission then talked about the compact itself and what it requires. He provided some interesting history on the compact, including the fact that it was viewed as a means for resolving about forty years of conflict that went back to 1890. It was a solution sixty years ago, and its objective was to ensure the distribution of the water resources of the Rio Grande as they existed at that time. Chris Gorbach of the Bureau of Reclamation provided some valuable insights on what the experience on the Pecos River has been. There are some hydrologic differences of course, as well as some others, but the interesting thing was the formation of an ad hoc committee the objective of which was to try finding an alternative to priority administration. As Mr. Saavedra pointed out, nobody wants priority administration because of the consequences. In the Pecos, they've been working hard to find an alternative. So far so good, though I think in principle they're living pretty close to the edge.

Following the description of the Urgent Shortfall Reality, we had a number of presenters talking about its implications for the Middle Rio Grande. Cliff Crawford, Professor Emeritus of Biology at the University of New Mexico, described the cumulative effects of past water resource management on the Middle Rio Grande, and suggested that a more natural flow regime and mosaic of riparian vegetation will be necessary in order to sustain the ecosystem in times of reduced river flow. Janie Chermak, a UNM economist, said if in fact there is a compact shortfall, there are going to be tradeoffs. She talked about competing objectives that have been put forth for managing water in the river and whether or not they are compatible. If our objective is to comply with the compact, maintain economic growth, and do all this in a way that is sustainable, these things are not compatible. She said to look at economic return for the amount of water required is a useful tool, but it

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doesn't provide for non-monetary values. Lisa Robert, farmer, ex-editor of the N.M. Water Dialogue, and a member of the Assessment Payers' Association of the MRGCD talked about some of those non-monetary values and about the importance of agriculture to the valley. Agriculture is what has made the Rio Grande valley; our entire culture is centered on it, from the place names of individual communities, to the various values it provides, including wildlife habitat, water quality, and major recharge to the aquifer. Her conclusion was that if we lose Ag, we also lose a lot more. We also negate promises made for many, many years to Native Americans and Mexican-Americans that their rights would be protected. Interstate Stream Commissioner Blane Sanchez wrapped the session up trying to provide a Native American perspective on this, speaking as an individual and not for a particular tribe or the ISC. The region's pueblos and tribes are not bound by the Rio Grande Compact; they weren't written into it. Tribal water rights have not been adjudicated in the basin, and Native Americans have been reluctant to get involved in the regional water planning process because of their concern that it may somehow be tied to adjudication. Regarding concerns about water use by some of the tribal governments for golf courses and resorts, Blane had an interesting comment: "Where would you rather see the water go? Would you rather it be used here in the region, or would you rather it go to Texas?"

I thought one of the most important comments yesterday came from Rolf Schmidt-Peterson of the ISC, and I'm wondering how this reconciles with comments made by Paul Saavedra this morning. Rolf said, after hearing the presentations by Vince Tidwell on the model, and Bartolino on the hydrologic reality, "We don't disagree with any of the information you're presenting here. With regards to the projection that we're going to bust the compact, we don't disagree with this." He also said he welcomed opportunities for decision-making at the local level, for figuring out how to share the shortage, and how to come up with a consensus plan for dealing with this locally. It was essentially an invitation to this region to participate in this decision, because if we don't, the state will.

The other important information that I got from yesterday's session involved the pie chart of water use in the middle valley. You've got this big slice called evaporation off Elephant Butte. We can't really do much about that. The two other big slices are riparian and agricultural uses, and as Rolf pointed out, if we get into a situation where we're looking at violation of the compact, the state's number one priority has to be meeting those requirements and the only places we can look to for that water are riparian and agricultural uses. How does this jibe with the interest and intent we heard from a lot of people on sharing the shortage? If we're only identifying one or two sectors--and primarily only one, agricultural use--for getting water to meet compact delivery requirements, how are the other water uses going to share in that shortage? What I'd like to see come out of today are ideas about what various water use sectors might do to share that shortage. It is clear there's going to be one. We got confirmation from everybody who spoke yesterday that in the very near term--two or three years-- we are going to be in a deficit situation in regard to the compact. The question is what are we going to do about it?