

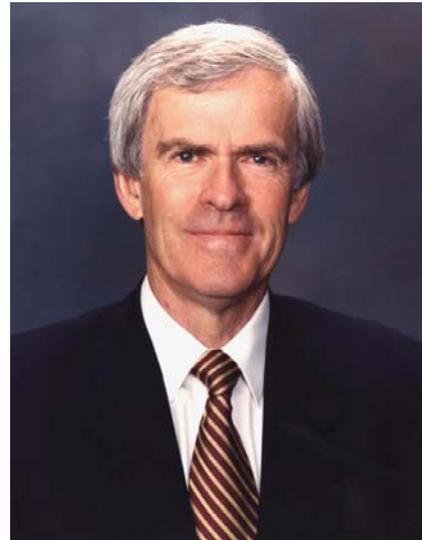
Straight Talk - Our Water is Over-Allocated

Congressional Perspective

Senator Jeff Bingaman by video:

I'd like to start by congratulating the Middle Rio Grande Water Assembly and Council of Governments for finalizing the Middle Rio Grande Regional Water Plan and securing its acceptance by the Interstate Stream Commission. This is a great accomplishment.

As you already know, implementing the plan is going to be a challenge. It will require the efforts of everyone in this room, the water users in the region, and local, state and federal officials, and I want to assure you that I stand ready to help in any way that I can.



Over-allocation and management is primarily a state and local responsibility. That is as it should be. Nevertheless, there needs to be a complimentary federal role to address the water supply and quality issues now confronting our communities. The issues are just too big and too costly to place the entire burden on each state alone, particularly when these issues are the direct result of federal laws.

The first area the federal government can be useful in is the area of studying and understanding what level of water resources are available to us, both surface water and groundwater. Unfortunately, the federal agencies that typically provide financial support for studying water resources in New Mexico—USGS, Reclamation, and the Corps of Engineers—have been singled out for budget cuts in the President's 2006 budget. While Congress will likely restore some of that funding, not all of it will be restored, and the trend of funding is in the wrong direction.

The USGS-prepared groundwater model for the Middle Rio Grande region has proven invaluable. For several years, I've been pushing for legislation that would similarly model aquifers in the U.S./Mexico border region and the Ogallala Aquifer, to facilitate planning and help avoid future conflicts over groundwater allocation.

In the coming weeks, I hope we'll have a debate in the Senate about another issue I believe the federal government can impact, and that is the issue of global warming. One projection estimates that global warming will cause significant changes in water resources because precipitation patterns will change. For instance, a warmer climate will result in more rain and less snow pack, and that could wreck havoc with agriculture, and industry, and hydroelectric power, all of which rely on the water supply made available by the mountain snow pack. In my view, we must also address the source of global warming quickly. When we turn the Energy Bill this week in the Senate, I intend to advocate for a measure that would result in substantial and long-term net reductions in greenhouse gas emissions in the most effective manner.

Another key role that the federal government can play is in the area of developing new technologies—for instance, desalination and other water purification technologies that are showing promise.

Desalination treatment costs have been reduced by one-half over the last decade. Further reductions in these costs will make desalination cost-competitive with other water supply options, and provide access to presently-underutilized and impaired water sources such as brackish groundwater, which is estimated to be in very large supply in our state of New Mexico.

One final area where the federal government can play a role is in watershed health, which I'm pleased to note was very-well integrated into the Middle Rio Grande Regional Water Plan. A healthy river system is a benefit to the entire community. I think many of us would probably agree that across the West, we can do a better job of balancing human demand for water with environmental needs. The most high-profile watershed issue in our state is no doubt the Middle Rio Grande, where the Endangered Species Act has been applied to protect the silvery minnow. For years, I've been disappointed with the Bush administration's lack of support for the Biological Opinion developed to manage minimum river flows, habitat improvements, endangered species population enhancements, and water quality improvements. The cost of implementing the Opinion is about \$23 million annually for ten years, yet the White House sought just \$8 million this year. I've received assurances from the Department of the Interior that additional resources will be sought next year, and that it will continue to fight for necessary funding in years to come.

I'd like to congratulate you, once again, for your efforts to develop the Middle Rio Grande Regional Water Plan. As you press forward with this plan, developed on the grassroots level, please know that you can call on me at anytime where I can be of help.