

The MRG Water Plan: What We've Accomplished and What Must Happen Now

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One of the benefits of the Dialogue is the opportunity for learning from each other and hearing about issues and problems in other areas. As many of us have said at one time or another, "Gosh, I am so glad to learn that someone else had that problem!" (One concept that I'll take away today is the idea that Santa Fe is a Martian!)

Our planning region, the Middle Rio Grande, includes Valencia, Sandoval and Bernalillo Counties. It is different from the Middle Rio Grande as defined under the Rio Grande Compact, which is a source of some problems.

I'd like to start off by stressing some of the positive activities we accomplished in the MRG planning process. The public participation program we put together was really inclusive, with meetings held throughout the three-county area. Ed Payne, now the Assembly's president, created a matrix that stretched for several feet along the MRCOG wall. That matrix included every recommendation, numbered so that one could follow it throughout the process. The region is massive - with 40% of the population and large and small users galore. In large part, I believe, because of that participation and listening, the plan was accepted by all of the local governments.

Confirmation of our water budget --and the deficit-- came in late 2004 when the Study by Papadopoulos was released. What it reiterates is that in 2000, the Middle Rio Grande as defined by the Rio Grande Compact used approximately 70,000 acre feet more than was renewed, much of that coming from ground water pumping. The plan focused on ways to reduce the deficit, cutting out some 15% of our uses unless we can find more water to satisfy that gap.

And yet, even though we busted our guts --particularly folks like Bob Wessely and Bob Prendergast-- and stuck to our guns when the integrity of the plan was challenged, where are we today?

- * The annual deficit continues. Since 2000, we've racked up an additional 350,000 acre feet. Several years ago, Mike Kernodle said that the overall debt amounted to a third of a cubic mile, or 1.1 million acre feet (1,151,136). Even if the deficit is reduced with use of San Juan Chama water, the debt will continue to be a factor.
- * Short and long term interests do not mesh -- short term promises are not made with long-term consequences considered.
- * The budget deficit is inconvenient, so one major sector decided that meeting the Rio Grande Compact was not our obligation, rather it was the State's to enforce.
- * Most users claim water rights for their uses. There may be as much as 4 times the paper water rights as wet water. No one is willing to simply forego claiming their rights --bought and paid for.
- * Urban growth over the past 40 years has resulted in depleting the aquifer. Conservation measures have reduced the per capita usage, but our population continues to grow. Which wet water uses and paper water rights will be cashed in to offset the additional users?
- * As mentioned in the morning panel, water rights were not dealt with in the plan. To balance our water budget, knowing the ownership of water is critical. In case anyone has checked

recently, the MRG is not on the OSE's 5 year plan to adjudicate. And yet transfers continued to be made.

- * Domestic wells continue to be drilled, adding additional users to our over-allocated basin.
- * Local data gaps, particularly in the Rio Jemez and Rio Puerco basins, hinder management options.
- * There are two subregional plans with differing Public Welfare Statements, not to mention different plans and public welfare statements along the Rio Grande.
- * MRCOG, our partner, dissolved the partnership within a few days of the ISC accepting the Regional Water Plan. MRCOG staff claim a lack of funding to prepare any update of the RWP.
- * Coordination between and among local governments has been somewhere between zero and minimal, and with our neighboring regions, likewise it has been zero.

That's not to say no work is being done.

- * In the past two years, following the Water Assembly's Plan Monitoring and Implementation Progress working team's effort, the Water Resources Board drafted a survey with telephone interviews currently being conducted by MRCOG of member governments. The MRCOG obtained funding from the Natural Resources Trustee to work on bosque restoration and draft sample conservation ordinances for three communities.

* Other entities are working on various water conservation plans, as well as various ways to reduce use or augment supplies. For instance, see the results of conservation by the Albuquerque Bernalillo County Water Utility Authority's customers as reported in today's Albuquerque Journal.

* The Water Assembly plans to initiate efforts towards education, outreach, and monitoring. For instance, we hope to have a Water 101 series in next fall's Continuing Education program. And we are about to celebrate our 10th year! With resources, we could expand those efforts.

But those efforts pale in comparison to what needs to be done.

So, while we had a great public participation component, all in all, it's business as usual. Political commitment looks to have been little more than lip service. What difference has the plan made?

Despite the grandiose schemes laid out in the chapter on implementation, there is very little being done in accord with it. There is no real coordination in the efforts under way. The State has offered neither the carrot nor the stick to make it happen. Indeed, it appears that we aren't much closer to dealing with these issues than we were ten years ago, when the first Assembly was held, even though we have put in 30,000 hours and held hundreds of meetings and over a million dollars was invested in the product.

With the lack of snowpack once again threatening low water supplies, to ignore what needs to be done comes close to a criminal act, in my opinion.

While some of these issues are more local to the MRG, many may resonate with others in the room. Most assuredly, like with the Pecos settlements, they will financially impact us all.

I have some suggestions -- for us both at a local level and at the state level. First the local ones:

1. We know there are constraints --legal, physical, fiscal and ethical-- but we need to abide by them.
2. We need to plan for the variability, not just good times and drought. Perhaps the adaptive governance model spoken of earlier bears further investigation.
3. We need to fill in the data gaps so that different stakeholder groups can participate at a more equal level.
4. We need to revisit the Public Welfare Statements so as to be able to give better guidance from the community to the State Engineer as opposed to market forces being so dominant.
5. To better implement our plans, we must work with our neighbors rather than rob water from each other.
6. Water is a social, economic and ecological good. We need to assign values to water uses, such as recognizing that recharge, open space, and habitat are part of benefits provided by agriculture.
7. We need to create ways to show that gains are being made.

Now some more generalized suggestions:

1. An annual source of funding for implementation of the regional water plans needs to be provided, whether from the ISC or the Water Trust Board. It needs to be ample enough to provide funds to all 16 regions.
2. To ensure uniformity in implementation, work needs to be done with the water planning regions and the Water Dialogue to create a template. (Precedence for this was the work done to create the Regional Water Planning Template.)
3. Like with the RWP template, public participation must be a key element in implementation, as well as monitoring, measuring and updating.
4. The ISC and OSE needs to work with the regions when setting state-wide priorities to leverage resources. Likewise, when work is needing to be done, communication needs to be present.
5. The ISC needs to assist regions in working with their upstream and downstream neighbors.
6. The OSE and ISC needs to put some teeth into ensuring that the plans are implemented.
7. To augment supplies by such activities as desalination and cloud seeding, federal dollars will be needed.
8. The ISC needs to help foster and continue dialogues.

I hope that there will be funds available by the next fiscal year to help us move forward.

Thanks!