

Water is connected somehow to almost every aspect of our lives; from eating to bathing to agriculture and even to recreation, we must have water to survive. Availability of water is also crucial to future growth and economic development. Here in New Mexico, and particularly this area, water resources are scarce even in good years, but recent droughts have further underscored the need to be careful about how we use this resource. As critical as water is to us, it goes without saying that some kind of plan needs to be in place to ensure that we have enough water for both today and tomorrow. This is where regional water planning comes in. Water plans are valuable tools in administering water in that they help identify both available resources and demands for those resources. Plans can also identify critical infrastructure needs within a region, as well as highlight major issues facing a particular region. For example, the existing regional water plan for San Miguel and Mora counties points out the large number of acequias in the area and the key role that acequias play in water administration from a cultural and economic perspective.

The Office of the State Engineer and Interstate Stream Commission have recognized that water planning is best done on a regional level due to the many variables in climate, water supply, demand and legal and institutional constraints. To that end, 16 separate regions have been formed, each with its own water plan. Those 16 plans help influence policymaking for local, state and federal governments. With that in mind, I think it's time to focus some more attention on the vital importance of both water planning and cooperation among all water users.

While the regional water planning process has been under way for some time now (it began in 1987), regional plans for Mora and San Miguel counties, and the northeastern corner of the state, were completed in 2005 and 2007, respectively. If anything has changed since then, it is that water has become even more scarce. As we begin to think about updating our regional water plans, we should begin to think about how best to coordinate efforts among all water users in northeastern New Mexico. Through coordination and communication, we can better understand our existing water situation with an eye toward incorporating whatever data we have on future weather patterns and their effect on already limited water resources.

Let's face it, this almost certainly will not be the last drought that New Mexico faces. By working with all water users in the region, we can grow to understand how one user's consumption affects another user. By sharing as much information as possible about water use and existing regional water planning efforts, we can help ensure that communities in the region will not have to face water shortages.

Sharing information also helps the regional water planning process by helping to identify the major needs of a particular region. For example, infrastructure needs have been identified as one of the key issues facing northeastern New Mexico. Indeed, Raton and Maxwell need resources to help fix wells there, while Springer, Santa Rosa and Logan each have dams that will need improvements soon. Colonias also could use a dam to help irrigate crops. While this is just the tip of the iceberg of infrastructure needs, identifying issues like these are a critical component of regional water plans.

Development of regional water plans is an important step in improving the way we administer and protect the limited amount of water available to us. In developing plans, input from water users is critical because it helps to paint an accurate picture of the various demands for water in the region. It is important that we, as a community, unify our efforts and work jointly to attain a successful water use and reuse plan.

At the end of the day, though, regional and statewide water plans are just that: plans. They offer a road map toward responsible water use for all New Mexicans. While such a map is undeniably important, it is only part of the puzzle. If water plans are to be of real value, they must be implemented and adhered to. This will require increased communication and cooperation at all levels of water use and policy, from individual acequia parciantes to local governments, the Office of the State Engineer, the legislature and even the federal government. Solutions to our water problems are not altogether different from solutions to many of the other problems in that cooperation and communication are the keys.