

Water — Always a Priority
By Senator Pete Campos

I first began to learn about the value of water from my grandfather, who was a public works director in Santa Rosa. Later, as a chamber of commerce president, I learned more about and began to really push for the effective use of water. It is no secret that we live in the desert, and that water here is scarce. We need it: from our bathrooms and kitchens to our livestock, acequias, wildlife and recreation. Still, it is easy enough to turn on the faucet, see water come out and forget how precious it is. Here in northeastern New Mexico, this is especially true: many communities in our corner of the state struggle to meet their water demands. Of course, there are ways to make the most of it: planning; development of regional or community-sized water projects; conservation; and collaboration are all approaches we employ regularly to stretch our supply. They are important steps. However, there is no silver bullet when it comes to water policy — no single policy or project will alleviate our concerns. Over the past several years, we have made tremendous progress, and we will continue to push sound policy at all levels. Still, the simple fact is that water will always be in short supply in northeastern New Mexico. There are ways for us to make the most of the water we do have, though.

First, we must maintain and eventually upgrade our aging water infrastructure. This means everything from pipes in the systems that deliver water to our homes, to fixing a leaky sink in the bathroom. Leaks at every level of the water delivery system account for a significant amount of loss, and while some fixes will be expensive, others are fairly simple. We must repair dams on the reservoirs that hold our water supplies, for safety's sake as well as supply. This is especially true in northeastern New Mexico: almost half of the dams listed by the Office of the State Engineer as having a pressing need for rehabilitation are in this corner of the state. With that in mind, it is worth noting that resources have been secured to improve dams near Las Vegas, Springer, Santa Rosa and Mora. In addition to dams, there is a need to support community water infrastructure in each community in northeastern New Mexico.

Also, it is important to keep in mind that wastewater systems are equally as important as delivery systems. Here's why: it only takes one problematic wastewater system, be it a leaky

sewer line or an overflowing septic tank, to contaminate drinking water and make our short supply of water even shorter.

I mentioned that some of the fixes we must make to our water and wastewater systems will be expensive. That's true, and I realize that financial times are tough — for families, for cities and counties and yes, for the state of New Mexico. However, that cannot be an excuse not to devote at least some funding to water projects. If water truly is as important as we all say it is, it is time to put our money where our mouths are and dedicate some funding to water projects, particularly in northeastern New Mexico.

While on the subject of funding, I want to take a moment to discuss capital outlay. Acknowledged, the capital outlay process is an important one, and while I am committed to securing as much funding as I can for communities in Senate District 8, it cannot be the only money we depend on to fund water projects. All too often, legislative committees are told of a community whose well dried up or that finds itself with some other dire infrastructure need because application process for state and federal funding was too cumbersome and instead chased "free" capital outlay money, only to find that funding was not enough to complete the project. There are numerous federal and state funding sources for water and wastewater projects, including the U.S. Department of Agriculture, U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, New Mexico Finance Authority and the Water Trust Board. Complicated application processes can no longer be an acceptable excuse for not seeking funding for our projects.

In order to make the most of whatever funding we can secure, careful planning and prioritization of projects have to take place. I believe that development of consistent criteria for prioritization of water projects is the next logical step on that front. The reality is that not all projects can be funded at once, and that some are going to have to wait while other projects are completed. Consistent criteria should ensure that every project gets taken care of, though. Projects must also be sufficiently planned, so that they are indeed shovel-ready once funding is secured. We can no longer afford to have funding sit unused because projects were not ready.

In addition to project planning, regional water plans, which will help us administer our water, must be completed. This process is already under way. It needs to continue from planning through implementation.

There are other steps we can begin taking now to ensure the most efficient use of our water. Some will require significant funding, others less so. For example, adjudication of water rights is critical and must be completed in all corners of New Mexico. It will be difficult to administer our water without knowing how much each user is entitled to. Funding that process is something of a bargain, too, compared to other projects. Conservation efforts also need to continue. Use of effluent for golf courses and sports fields, which occurs at the Gene Torres Golf Course and Las Vegas City Public School District, should be considered as an option in still more communities.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we must work together to address our water needs. Collaboration, communication and negotiation are critical if we are to meet our diverse water needs. In times of shortage, we have to find ways to share what we do have. This is true in our corner of the state, but it's also true for all New Mexicans.