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Life's Sustenance

New Mexico's wide open spaces suggest development here has just begun. Only an occasional ranch breaks up the view of the rolling plains in the east. Traditional villages are hidden in the northern mountains. Small towns, the developing Zuni Pueblo and Navajo Nation are scattered among the red- and yellow-banded mesas of the west, and the populated river valleys leading south are bordered by great expanses of sparsely populated landscape.

One-hundred years ago, when New Mexico's water laws were being established, this illusion was reality. The population of the entire state was less than 200,000. Albuquerque, the state's largest community then as now, had fewer than 7,000 people. The call was for development and the duties of the State Engineer, the state's water regulator, were focused on opening the floodgates to the beneficial use of water.

Since then, the state's population has grown ten-fold and the call for more water, not only for the water we need but the water we want, has grown more acute. But our rapidly urbanizing state must face the fact that we live in an arid region. We must shift our focus from expansion to stewardship, from water development to water management.

This growth in the demand for water, along with changes in climate and changes in the demographics of our state, has made administration of water law more complex. The State Engineer faces increasing pressure to come up with solutions in an ever-more-complicated environment. His staff faces more lawsuits than ever, harder decisions on the prioritization of water use, and the reality of drought one year and record snow pack the next. The State Engineer's budget has grown in recent years but has not kept pace with inflation and the growing demands on the office. It is important that this office, responsible for a critical resource, has adequate staff to do its job responsibly. The staff will be under greater pressure in the future to come up with innovative answers for a demanding water-using public that is increasingly urban.

The recent drought – unlikely to be offset by this year’s substantial snow fall in some of our mountains – could be the wake up call we needed to bring perspective to our expectations about water. We resist water conservation when it is an inconvenience; we simply want the water to run when we turn on the faucet. But we must recognize that the days when we could let the hose run in the backyard are over.

To meet the demand for water today and tomorrow, we must work together to find ways to conserve water that we can all live with. We must provide the State Engineer with sufficient resources to oversee community and state planning for water use. Our future depends on managing this asset to preserve our quality of life and permit for growth and development in the future. Working together, we can ensure that there is enough water for everyone.

Senator Campos, D-Las Vegas, has served as the senator from District 8 in northern New Mexico since 1991 and has been a member of the Senate Finance Committee since 1997. Campos, superintendent of the Las Vegas City Schools since 2004, is also a member of the Legislature Finance Committee, Information Technology Oversight Committee, Legislative Ethics Committee, Legislative Council, and Finance Authority Oversight Committee.