

State should preserve critical water resources

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New Mexico has an incredible opportunity to preserve our state's critical water resources and address other climate-related concerns. The time is now for the state to act as it relates to the condition of our forests and the health of our water reserves.

This legislative session, I've sponsored Senate Bill 162 for strategic water reserves, and Senate Bill 145, creating the New Mexico Reforestation Center. These legislative initiatives represent important and proactive steps to protect our natural resources for future generations.

SB 162, co-sponsored by my colleague, Sen. Liz Stefanics, budgets \$15 million to fund the strategic water reserve, a repository for groundwater, leased water and water rights. We are pursuing this funding for compliance purposes relating to interstate compacts and perhaps more critically, to safeguard and benefit protected and endangered species.

While the water reserve has existed for many years, it has not been consistently funded, making it difficult for the state to meet its obligations as part of interstate river compacts.

Securing dedicated funding of the strategic reserve reflects New Mexico's recognition and commitment to conserve fish and wildlife in our important river basins and demonstrates leadership for drought mitigation. Water is among the most precious of our natural resources, and as a citizen legislator who has grown up in New Mexico, I believe we must protect it on behalf of our children and grandchildren.

Senate Bill 145 establishes a reforestation center to address the state's current and future reforestation needs. The legislation is a critical step in mitigating the impacts of catastrophic wildfires and a changing climate on our state's forests, and includes seedling and planting programs which, if passed, will be carried out by the Forestry Division of the Energy, Minerals and Natural Resources Department in partnership with the John T. Harrington Research Center, the University of New Mexico and New Mexico State University.

SB 145 would appropriate over \$4 million in funding to accomplish many valuable benefits for forest health; water quality and quantity; wildlife habitats; and recreational purposes.

The center will accomplish its mission for healthier forests through the production of 5 million seedlings annually, climate-smart tree planting, and enhanced programming for forest based economic growth. Additionally, New Mexico's investment in the design and construction of the center would allow the state to leverage millions of

dollars for reforestation, including \$200 million in rePlant funding and \$250 million in Build Back Better funds, creating valuable jobs in our rural communities.

New Mexico's forests account for over half of all water used by municipalities and agricultural entities in our state.

Unfortunately, for many reasons including historic fire suppression and drought, forest health is declining in New Mexico and the Southwest United States.

The proposed provisions of SB 145 will help to mitigate these trends, restore New Mexico's forests and ecosystems, and provide water security for our communities and businesses.

As a public official who has served for several decades, I believe it is my purpose to ensure the health, safety and well-being of my constituents and all our state's residents. Pursuing these critical environmental objectives is consistent with that goal, and I look forward to passage of these important pieces of legislation.

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