

Agreement sets aside Abiquiú storage space for Rio Grande

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By Staci Matlock

A move to shore up Rio Grande flows took a step forward recently when Albuquerque, the Army Corps of Engineers and environmental groups inked an agreement to set aside storage space in the Abiquiú Reservoir for water devoted to the river.

It's also another victory for environmentalists and water managers who see water flows in the state's rivers as critical to both people and ecosystems. The city of Santa Fe recognized the benefits in 2012 when it approved a target flow for its namesake river.

The recent Abiquiú agreement was between the Albuquerque-Bernalillo County Water Utility Authority, six environmental groups and the Army Corps. It sets aside 30,000 acre-feet of the Albuquerque water authority's storage space at Abiquiú for a so-called "environmental pool." One acre-foot is equal to about 325,851 gallons of water.

"Securing storage in the Middle Rio Grande is like opening a bank account. It secures water for the future," said Jen Pelz, wild rivers program manager for WildEarth Guardians, a nonprofit environmental group.

The water would be released as requested by environmentalists to supplement low flows in the Middle Rio Grande or to create large pulses that mimic the periodic floods the river once experienced before it was straightened and impounded. Periodic floods help scour and clean river channels, depositing new sediment and helping riparian areas.

Periodic high-flow events help the habitat needed by endangered Rio Grande silvery minnows, southwestern willow flycatchers and yellow-billed Cuckoos, Pelz said. The pulses also keep soil moist to boost cottonwood and other riparian plant growth. Healthy riparian zones help clean the water and attract hikers and bicyclists to shady oases like Albuquerque's bosque.

Now the environmental groups have to come up with the water for the Abiquiú storage pool. They'll need to lease or purchase water rights from other people. Currently, the agreement limits the lease and purchase to San Juan Chama Project water rights. The

project brings water through a pipeline from San Juan River tributaries to the Chama River where it flows into the Rio Grande. The project water currently supplies water through river diversion projects to Santa Fe, Albuquerque and hundreds of farmers in the Middle Rio Grande Conservancy District.

Drought has reduced the flows in many of the state's rivers. Pelz thinks this might actually be a good time to encourage farmers to lease their water rights. Many didn't receive enough of a water allotment this year to irrigate their fields in the Middle Rio Grande. She said they may find it more economical, if the drought continues, to lease their water rights to use in the Abiquiú environmental pool. Leasing the water rights means they won't lose them.

Currently the groups have about \$270,000 to lease or purchase water rights. Pelz said San Juan Chama Project water is leasing for about \$100 per acre-foot currently.

Keeping some water in rivers instead of using it all for utilities, urban development and farming has many benefits to people, say scientists. Healthy, flowing rivers and the associated vegetation help clean drinking water, recharge groundwater aquifers and slow floods. These benefits are called ecosystem services or, in economic terms, living natural capital. "It gives economic value to something upon which we all depend," said Felicity Broennan, executive director of the Santa Fe Watershed Association. "People don't necessarily get that connection. People are worried about jobs and making a living, but they forget that is dependent on healthy ecosystems."

The city of Santa Fe recognized the benefits of devoting some water to its river in 2012 by approving the Target Flow for a Living River ordinance. The ordinance allows up to 1,000 acre-feet per year of water to by-pass the municipal reservoirs to supplement flows. In dry years, the amount is reduced proportionately.

This summer, those targeted flows in the Santa Fe River, released in periodic pulses after natural runoff from snowmelt and rain had dried up, helped keep alive hundreds of cottonwood and willow saplings planted along a two-mile stretch of the river from St. Francis Drive to Frenchy's Field bridge. The renewed flows from the by-pass water brought families down to the river to play and relax. The Santa Fe River is a tributary to the Rio Grande.

Another agreement in Colorado also will provide a little supplemental flow to a Rio Grande tributary. The Terrance Reservoir spillway in the San Luis Valley was recently improved and in return the reservoir will release 2,000 acre-feet of water in the fall to supplement low flows in the Alamosa River. The agreement is between reservoir

managers and the nonprofit Alamosa Riverkeepers.

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