

# ALBUQUERQUE JOURNAL



## Deal allows farmers to sell irrigation water

By [John Fleck / Journal Staff Writer](#) on Sun, Jul 14, 2013

POSTED: 12:05 am

*Copyright © 2013 Albuquerque Journal*

To the list of the Lower Rio Grande's famous crops, like Hatch's chile and Mesilla's pecans, you'll soon be able to add cottonwoods and Goodding's willows.

The Elephant Butte Irrigation District board of directors last month approved an agreement that allows farmers to sell water rights so the water can be used to help grow riverside vegetation.

The deal, negotiated over the last decade by environmental groups led by the Audubon Society and the irrigation district's farmers, is the largest New Mexico example to date of a growing effort across the western United States to reclaim water for riverside environments.

By setting up programs under which willing farmers can sell their water on a short- or long-term basis, the agreements are an effort to sidestep farmers-versus-environmentalist battles that have dominated politics in some western river basins.

"As the water supplies decrease, shifting some water back to nature will be needed to keep the riverside habitats alive and healthy," said Beth Bardwell of the Audubon Society.

That argument at first did not sit well with the Lower Rio Grande farm community, said Gary Esslinger, manager of the irrigation district. "My board is made up of farmers who believe that all water down here has been appropriated for agriculture," Esslinger said in an interview. "I had to convince my board that if we didn't start dealing with this, someone was going to take our water."

The result is an agreement under which the International Boundary and Water Commission, the federal agency responsible for maintaining the Rio Grande channel between Percha Dam in the Hatch Valley and the Rio Grande's water delivery point in Mexico, will buy enough water from farmers to irrigate up to 500 acres of Rio Grande riverside habitat.

The water will support planting of cottonwoods, willows and other native vegetation that has long been absent from a stretch of river channel between flood control levees that has primarily been used as a water delivery channel for decades.

Already, within a month of the irrigation district board's approval, discussions with two farmers about the possible sale of their water are underway, Esslinger said.

It is the second New Mexico example of a transfer from agriculture to provide environmental water. The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation has been buying water during dry years since 2004 from the Fort Sumner Irrigation District to maintain flows in the Pecos River for the endangered bluntnose shiner, said Mike Hamman, manager of the bureau's Albuquerque office.

There are also conversations underway about a similar program in the farm water system between Cochiti Reservoir and Socorro managed by the Middle Rio Grande Conservancy District, though early discussions suggest it will not be easy.

Sen. Tom Udall, D-N.M., included language in the Fiscal Year 2014 appropriations bill urging the Bureau of Reclamation to explore setting up a program under which conservancy district farmers could be paid to take land out of production during dry years, with the irrigation water they would have used left in the Rio Grande. As a first step, Udall's legislation calls for a water metering program for conservancy district farmers. Currently, individual farmers' water use is not measured.

New Mexico Attorney General Gary King weighed in with a letter Friday to the conservancy district and the New Mexico Interstate Stream Commission calling for a feasibility study of a farm water leasing program in the middle valley.

Such a program could provide flexibility in managing the Middle Rio Grande, said Jen Pelz of WildEarth Guardians, one of the groups advocating a farm-to-river water transfer program.

The conservancy district, one of the most powerful water management agencies in the state, has not taken a position on the issue. Board chair Derrick Lente, in an interview this week, called it "a discussion worth having."

Behind the scenes, the conservancy district's staff has expressed reservations. A memo sent to Udall's office by district chief executive Subhas Shah said restrictions under state law might make it difficult to use the district's water for other than agricultural use.

The memo also questioned the idea of measuring the amount of water the district's farmers use. "The MRGCD irrigators and the Board that represents them has not determined whether metering would be a top priority for expenditures by the MRGCD, or whether the money could be better spent elsewhere," the memo says.