

RIO GRANDE: Enviro group nabs reservoir storage space to boost river flows

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April Reese, E&E reporter

An environmental group and water authorities have struck an unprecedented agreement to store water in a reservoir on the Middle Rio Grande to boost river flows during dry times.

The accord, signed by WildEarth Guardians, the Bernalillo County Water Utility Authority and federal water managers this week, secures an "environmental pool" of 30,000 acre-feet of storage space in Abiquiu Reservoir in northern New Mexico to sustain flows in the Rio Grande downstream.

While the Bureau of Reclamation stores some water in the reservoir for the endangered silvery minnow, this is the first agreement that allows an environmental group to bank water in a reservoir, signatories of the agreement said.

The environmental pool will claim about 15 percent of the water authority's total storage in the reservoir. WildEarth Guardians must now find farmers willing to lease the group their water.

"We're happy to work with these groups to do what we can for the river system," said David Morris, a spokesman for the water authority, which provides water to Albuquerque and surrounding cities. "We're essentially giving up some storage space in the reservoir, but it's a very big reservoir, and we don't anticipate that sharing that space for the groups will have any negative impact on our ability to deliver water to our customers."

The deal is part of a 2007 settlement that committed urban water managers to offset the environmental impacts of taking water from the Rio Grande under the San Juan-Chama Project, which pipes water from the Colorado River Basin into the Rio Grande Basin.

The agreement is intended to help ensure water is available for environmental needs during times of drought, which are expected to become more frequent under climate change projections for the Southwest -- a region that is already seeing the effects of warming.

During dry times, stored water may be the only water available to the river, said Jen Pelz, wild rivers program director for Santa Fe-based WildEarth Guardians.

"To try to restore some natural flow to the river, storage is really the only option," Pelz said. "It's really important to mimic the historic flow regime."

Earlier this summer, endangered silvery minnows had to be rescued from stretches of the river that were completely dry -- a frequent occurrence on the Middle Rio Grande (Greenwire, July 2).

The water could be used to increase flows during drought years to help keep those reaches wet for the minnow and other species to spawn, she said. But it could also come in handy in wet years, when the water could be released to push the river high enough to help native cottonwoods regenerate, she added.

"It gives environmental groups a seat at the table, because we have control over this water," she said.

But before the group can take advantage of the agreement, it will need to find farmers willing to lease their water to the organization, which Pelz admits could be difficult given a history of conflict over the silvery minnow.

"It's definitely on our radar as a challenge," she said. "Our focus is now going to shift to try to build those relationships with farmers."

Leasing water to the group could benefit farmers by giving them a source of income during dry years when it's risky to plant crops, she added, noting that successful leasing programs have been put in place in Colorado and elsewhere around the West (Greenwire, July 8).

"The transfer isn't permanent, so those farmers will still be able to irrigate," she added.

Subhas Shah, chief engineer for the Middle Rio Grande Conservancy District, which delivers water to irrigators in the Middle Rio Grande Valley, said even if farmers are willing to enter into leasing agreements with the group, the system isn't set up to accommodate such transfers.

"It will be difficult to manage and control that water that's stored at Abiquiu, because we don't know where the water is leased from and where it's going to," he said. "We do not know how it would be managed."

No leasing currently occurs within the district, he added.

Sen. Tom Udall (D-N.M.) has inserted language into the water and energy fiscal 2014 appropriations bill that calls for establishing a leasing program on the Middle Rio Grande. The Senate is expected to vote on the measure soon.