

Splitting the Rio Grande: Colorado farmers, New Mexico raft guides clash over flows



A diversion dam on the Rio Grande Canal controls how much water is taken off the Rio Grande and sent to farmers cross the San Luis Valley. Flows in the canal during irrigation season can be about three times as much as the Rio Grande itself when it gets to the state line. J.R. Logan/The Taos News

May 17, 2014

TAOS — The offices of the San Luis Valley Irrigation District are housed in an aging Quonset hut on a sleepy side street in Center, Colo. To an outsider, the hand-painted sign and worn carpet imply an organization that is old-fashioned and outdated. But in reality, the district is part of one of the most modern and sophisticated water management operations in the country.

District Superintendent Travis Smith has made a career out of water management in the San Luis Valley. He's well acquainted with the myriad challenges the valley's irrigators face — both environmental and economic — and he's wary of outsiders who are quick to criticize the enormous amount of water consumed by the farmers he serves.

In recent years, those criticisms have grown louder. Prolonged regional drought has strained relations between water users north and south of the border. Long sections of the Rio Grande in New Mexico have dried up entirely, and the state's pecan and chile industries have suffered

badly for lack of water.

Rafting outfitters in Taos County have joined those focusing their ire north. Some guides complain scant Rio Grande flows are killing their businesses. This is particularly true because rafters and kayakers can't run one of the area's main recreation attractions — the Taos Box — if irrigators leave almost nothing of the river in the late spring and summer.

In preparation for his interview with The Taos News, Smith has three things on his desk: the daily Rio Grande flow report detailing exactly how water from the river will be allocated that day; a pocket-sized copy of the Rio Grande Compact, which shows how much water Colorado owes New Mexico; and a newspaper article about a Santa Fe environmental group threatening to sue Colorado over its irrigation practices.

Like just about everyone in the San Luis Valley, Smith's first point is that Colorado is strictly abiding by the terms of the compact. The compact is an interstate agreement between Colorado, New Mexico and Texas that was signed in 1938. Colorado's obligation to New Mexico varies from year to year, depending on how much water comes into the valley, but in general Colorado must deliver about a quarter of the river's annual flow to the state line.

Smith's claim Colorado is fulfilling its end of the bargain is accurate. In fact, deliveries to the state line have been slightly greater than the compact's requirements in recent years.

But there's a catch — that amount is calculated on an annual basis, meaning Colorado can take nearly all of the river in the spring and summer (coinciding, of course, with rafting season and irrigation season for New Mexico farmers), let it flow unimpeded in the winter, and still meet the terms of the compact. On Monday, runoff from Rio Grande's headwaters came barreling from the San Juan Mountains and into the San Luis Valley. A streamflow gauge just west of Del Norte, Colo., (used to measure the full volume for purposes of meeting the compact) clocked the turbid river at around 2,100 cubic-feet per second.

Moving east from that point during irrigation season, however, the river loses water like a leaky bucket.

Before it even hit Del Norte on Monday, about a quarter of the river — 500 cfs — was diverted into the Rio Grande Canal. The canal carries water as far as 30 miles to the northern fringe of the valley, and it supplies dozens of smaller ditches along the way. From there, canal after canal continues to eat away at the flow. By the time the river got to Alamosa on Monday, a 31-mile drive from Del Norte, just 5 percent of the flow remained.

From Alamosa, the river makes a right-hand turn and heads south toward New Mexico, leaving the sea of green circles to enter a barren volcanic plateau.

The last streamflow gauge in Colorado sits near an isolated bridge on a dusty county road about five miles north of New Mexico. Measurements from this gauge — known as “Rio Grande near Lobatos” — are used to verify how much water is left in the river for New Mexico. On Monday,

the gauge showed a steady 150 cfs — exactly 7 percent of the flow at Del Norte.

So where does all that diverted water — more than a billion gallons that day alone — end up? The ditches that take from the main river channel saturate the valley floor and replenish shallow groundwater supplies. In much of the valley, that same water is then pumped back to the surface through ubiquitous center-pivot sprinklers to nourish thirsty young crops of potatoes, grains and alfalfa.

All told, there are about 600,000 irrigated acres and 2,200 center-pivot sprinklers in the San Luis Valley. It's an immense industry that arguably supports the area's entire economy.

Craig Cotten with the Division of Water Resources said he and his team start calculating flows in the river and irrigation ditches every day around dawn. By 7 a.m., calls start going out to adjust head gates on ditches to meet the prescribed flows.

Cotten and his team also determine which irrigators will get water and which ones won't, based on the date of their water right. There's one number on those daily reports that is of particular interest to New Mexicans: "Today's direct curtailment." It's a percentage that represents how much of that water measured at Del Norte must pass through to the state line.

Monday's curtailment percentage was 7 percent. Based on flows at Del Norte and Lobatos, Cotten hit their target square on the head.

That accuracy relates to Smith's second point in defending Colorado irrigators. In 2002, horrific drought put the valley's entire agricultural industry on the brink. River flows weren't sufficient to wet the fields of senior water rights holders, while thousands of wells were pumping the aquifer dry. The incredibly complex system of water accounting that now exists in the valley came out of that crisis, and tens of thousands of once-irrigated acres are being fallowed in acknowledgement that the industry outgrew its water supply.

The subsequent 12 years haven't been much wetter, Smith said, meaning a lot of multigenerational farm families are scared of losing everything. On top of all these concerns, a huge wildfire in the Rio Grande's headwaters last summer is expected to seriously hurt the watershed all the way to the valley, and similar wildfires are likely around the corner. In short, San Luis Valley farmers already feel like they've sacrificed. And they already feel under siege.

So when Santa Fe-based environmental group WildEarth Guardians filed notice of a lawsuit against Colorado for violating the Endangered Species Act earlier this year, the threat wasn't well taken by Smith and his neighbors.

The group's notice alleged that San Luis Valley irrigators were not leaving enough water in the river to re-create natural runoff conditions to allow the beleaguered silvery minnow to spawn. Jennifer Pelz with WildEarth Guardians told The Taos News in February the notice was meant to bring state officials and irrigators to the table. She said this week her group is still hoping for some kind of dialogue. But the specter of litigation seems to have had the opposite effect.

Smith said there might be room in the limited storage reservoirs to let a little more water flow south during the peak irrigation season. But he said the notice of litigation caught everyone in the valley by surprise and soured them quickly.

“Nobody likes to be threatened,” Smith said. “There is no room for compromise or conversation when you’re threatened with litigation.”

For Taos County’s part, the approach to finding a way to get more water to the state line in spring has been mixed. Los Ríos River Runners owner Cisco Guevara has stepped on a few toes by voicing ardent criticism of San Luis Valley farming practices. He said his approach may be blunt, but he’s trying to draw attention to the impact Colorado’s big sip of the river has downstream.

Steve Harris, owner of Far Flung Adventures, has taken a more diplomatic approach, spending years getting to know water managers in the San Luis Valley and inviting officials to his annual Guide Rendezvous to explain the intricacies of the compact and, hopefully, foster a mutual understanding.

But whatever the tack, the depths of a record-setting drought might not be the most fruitful time to be renegotiating water sharing, especially when every cubic foot of water has such a direct economic correlation for Colorado farmers.

“If you take the river away, take the water away, inside of two years there would be nothing left,” said Steve Vandiver, general manager of the Rio Grande Water Conservation District. “It’s not like we don’t care [about New Mexico].”

“We are very adamant in making sure we meet our compact obligations. But people here are concerned that there would be no end to it. That if they were to give anything, it wouldn’t be enough.”

The Taos News is a sister paper of The Santa Fe New Mexican.