

# ALBUQUERQUE JOURNAL



## Water storage accord settled

By John Fleck / Journal Staff Writer | August 27, 2013

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A coalition of environmental groups has signed a deal with water managers aimed at sidestepping litigation over the flow of water in the Rio Grande.

The deal lets the groups, led by Santa Fe-based WildEarth Guardians, store water in Abiquiu Reservoir on the Rio Chama. It creates the opportunity for the groups to buy water from Rio Grande Valley farmers, using the water to support environmental flows in the river during drought conditions, said Jen Pelz, head of WildEarth Guardians' Wild Rivers Program.

Abiquiu acts like a giant water savings bank for Rio Grande water users. Under the agreement, the Albuquerque Bernalillo County Water Utility Authority will allow the environmental groups to use a portion of the utility's storage space in the reservoir. Water could be stored during spring runoff, to be released during summer drought.

Pelz and other environmentalists have been pushing for the creation of market-based environmental flows in New Mexico rivers. The idea is to find ways to pay farmers to forgo irrigation in a dry year in order to free up water for the endangered Rio Grande silvery minnow and other environmental purposes.

It is an approach that is growing in the western United States, with government agencies and environmental groups paying enough to make it economically worthwhile for some farmers to sell water rather than using it to raise crops, according to a study by Colorado State University economist John Loomis.

The Abiquiu storage agreement is a key step toward creating a pilot project in the Rio Grande in central New Mexico, Pelz said. The Albuquerque water utility and the environmental groups have collectively contributed \$270,000 to a "Living Rivers Fund." With the storage agreement in place, the groups can now begin the search for farmers willing to sell some water, though no prices have yet been set.