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Water utility wants a few more acre-feet from the Rio Grande

By John Fleck / Journal Staff Writer
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Albuquerque's water utility is asking state permission to take more water out of the Rio Grande for use by area homes and businesses.

The Albuquerque Bernalillo County Water Utility Authority application is small, but has drawn opposition from farm water and environmental interests who fear it could open the door to much larger water use in the future, reducing the river's flows through Albuquerque's bosque.

"This sets a really bad precedent," said Michael Jensen of Amigos Bravos, an environmental group.

"Expanded Rio Grande water use by the utility could reduce flows for natural habitat, endangered species and recreation in the riverside forest that threads through Albuquerque", said Jen Pelz of WildEarth Guardians, another environmental group that objects to the proposal.

The water utility wants the expanded water rights to give it more flexibility during years like the current one with drought punctuated by high flows following rainstorms, said John Stomp, the agency's chief operating officer. The utility's intent is to divert storm water flowing past the agency's Alameda diversion dam so that it could be treated and used in the municipal drinking water system, Stomp said in an interview Wednesday.

Diversions would be done only when there is sufficient flow in the river to also meet the needs of the environment and downstream water users, Stomp said.

The application, filed with the New Mexico Office of the State Engineer in July, involves the transfer of 6 acre-feet per year of water rights from a farm in Valencia County. Albuquerque typically uses 100,000 acre-feet of water per year, making the amount of water involved in the transaction negligible.

In a controversial twist, the water utility has asked for permission to divert twice as much water from the river as the amount of the water right. Six acre-feet of water would be consumed by Albuquerque residents, and six acre-feet would be returned to the river at the water utility's South Valley sewage treatment plant.

The effect would be to further dry the stretch of river through Albuquerque, said Janet Jarratt, a Valencia County farmer who is filing a formal appeal against the proposal. The Middle Rio Grande Conservancy District, WildEarth Guardians and Amigos Bravos are among the other organizations that have already filed a protest, and other protests are expected.

If the state approves the application, the water utility will consider filing other water rights transfer applications to expand the practice, Stomp said.