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## COMMENTARY

# Will the Gila River flow into Texas?

Dating back to the 1930s, news stories document the efforts of water development interests to capture and consume a significant portion of New Mexico's last mainstem, free-flowing river, the Gila. Current efforts proceed under the banner of the Arizona Water Settlements Act (AWSA) and involve 14,000 acre feet (af) per year, less evaporation. Under AWSA, \$66 million is allotted to the 4-county region (Luna, Hidalgo, Grant and Catron counties) over ten years pretty much for any water related purpose, while up to \$62 million more could come if New Mexico were to opt to divert 14,000 af of Gila water via a large scale diversion project with attendant canals and off-stream reservoir.

"Don't let the water run to Arizona" has been the rally of the water developers throughout, regardless of the fact that in 80 years no one in southwest New Mexico has appeared ready to pay the costs of diverting, storing and delivering the water, even with the help of a sweetheart government loan. This fisherman wonders if it isn't more likely that the water in question will run to Texas. This makes sense once one takes a look at the water politics of the Rio Grande in New Mexico.

Even with the San Juan diversion, the Rio Grande is over-subscribed in New Mexico. Agriculture currently owns most of the water rights



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but burgeoning urban entities have already used political weight to leverage permits from the Office of State Engineer (OSE) for an eventual conversion of agricultural water rights to municipal-industrial (M&I) use. This seemingly ineluctable growth plus required water deliveries to Texas already places a crimp and creates competition over water use and development in New Mexico's middle and southern Rio Grande.

It is not coincidental that a water development entity called San Augustin Ranch has made application to the State Engineer to exploit some 54,000 af/year from the aquifer underlying the San Augustin Plain; an almost exact match with the 55,000 af/yr deficit shortfall as recently identified in the Middle Rio Grande Water Budget. Most observers see the water from this application, if approved, headed for the Rio Grande to satisfy some of the deficit water use in the middle and lower Rio Grande

New Mexico. It is not hard to see that Gila River water could be used in the same way.

A proposal by D.B. Stephens Inc. on behalf of the City of Deming, outlines a Gila River diversion in the Gila Valley to a 42,000 af off-stream impoundment. Then by pipeline a net of about 10,000 af/year would flow over the Continental Divide for possible use by Silver City, the nearby Mining District, and finally to Deming itself. Significantly, none of these municipal entities has shown any interest in contracting for the water due to costs. The preliminary capital cost is estimated by Stephens, Inc. at \$250 million - about double the maximum available Federal subsidy of \$128 million - plus yearly operation and maintenance costs of about \$5 million and a yearly exchange cost of about \$1.5 million must be paid, presumably by the user. The estimate in capital costs by the Bureau of Reclamation, accounting for inflation, is at \$300 million+.

It is said that Las Cruces is interested and is big enough to contract for the Gila water. Well, maybe. But one wonders how serious that city might be about imported Gila River water when these costs are juxtaposed with simply buying water rights from Mesilla Valley or Mimbres Valley farmers, many of whom are willing to sell. Of course over in the Gila Valley

the farmers say they can use all the additional water if it were available. "Keep the water in the (Gila) basin!" A noble, right-minded goal. But they also would admit they would have trouble even paying the exchange costs; capital and operation costs would be prohibitive.

Who pays? Might some even larger entity - e.g. "greater" Albuquerque or The State - fork over the \$300 million, divert and pump the Gila water to the lower Rio Grande, satisfying water obligations in southern New Mexico and/or Texas, thereby initiating an exchange diversion in the Rio Grande further north (upstream) where most of the population resides?

Make no mistake, the ISC has no intention of allowing that 14,000 af to be "wasted" as an instream flow, or of forgoing the full \$128 million. At a meeting of the Gila/San Francisco Water Commission in Glenwood on January 9, 2010, Craig Roepke of the ISC commented that he hoped some local entity would come up with a commitment to put the 14,000 af to beneficial use, "but failing that the ISC (representing the State) would come up with a use on its own.....and when that water can be put to beneficial use and improve the environment you will find that the State will not allow that water to run down and be diverted in the Duncan Valley (of Arizona)."

Roepke also said that under the conditions of the AWSA, the Federal money provided and the project "unit" (the project taking water from the river) must be spent and/or constructed within the 4-county area, "but the water can go anywhere in New Mexico."

Don't let the water run to Arizona! But would Texas be a better choice? The \$66 million Federal subsidy provided to southwest New Mexico, that may be used for any water related project that "meets a water supply demand," provides the basis for an ample water future for the region including municipal and ag conservation, development of large aquifer reserves, and watershed restoration. And it does so without placing further demands on the river, or initiating expensive, convoluted water transfers to far away growth enclaves (recall the California Owens Valley authoritarian push)

These transfers threaten the hard-earned, balanced water use found in certain rural regions in the state from whence the water is drawn. Such rural communities should be largely left alone with their water, and where engaged, studied for their sustainability rather than exploited for their lack of political cachet.

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