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Contact: Allyson Siwik, Executive Director
Gila Conservation Coalition
575.538.8078 office; 575.590.7619 cell
info@gilaconservation.org; www.gilaconservation.org

Interstate Stream Commission Approves Projects for AWSA Assessment *Non-diversion Alternatives Remain on the List for Further Consideration*

Albuquerque, NM – The Interstate Stream Commission (ISC) decided today on the projects that will move forward for final consideration under the Arizona Water Settlements Act (AWSA), leading up to the December 2014 deadline for notifying the Department of the Interior whether or not New Mexico will develop Gila River water. The Commission approved ISC staff recommendations to further refine and study most of the 20 Tier 2 proposals, including 16 non-diversion alternatives and 3 diversion projects.

Municipal conservation scored at the top of the ISC Evaluation Panel's Tier 2 ranking list. The Commission approved initiation of the Gila Conservation Coalition's proposal to set up a municipal conservation fund by providing "initial funding of \$100,000 made available as soon as possible, and include water harvesting as allowed under Office of the State Engineer Water Use and Conservation Bureau policies. The initial funding for this proposal is intended to test the utility and feasibility of the proposal and thereby provide the Commission with adequate data and information to assess the value of this proposal by 2014," according to the ISC staff recommendation approved today.

"The Gila Conservation Coalition is very pleased that the Commissioners approved municipal conservation, including water harvesting, for further consideration under the AWSA. Municipal conservation measures represent a cost-effective way to reduce the demand for water, extend the life of our water resources and therefore reduce the need to develop costly new water supplies," stated GCC executive director, Allyson Siwik. "We are disappointed that the full amount of funding recommended by the Evaluation Panel -- \$500,000—was cut to \$100,000 by ISC staff. This represents a significant under-investment in evaluation of water savings through conservation."

The Grant County Regional Water Supply project along with the Bayard Effluent Reuse project and Grant County Infrastructure and Reservoir proposal will be considered together to investigate how these projects "might be combined or refined to best utilize the treated effluent of those

communities at the least cost,” according to the ISC staff memo. “The Grant County Regional Water supply project is a high priority for water users in Silver City and the Mining District, and should be a top priority for the AWSA planning process, since the project meets a real water need now by providing a long-term, sustainable water supply to 26,000 people including Mining District communities with an extremely urgent water need, such as Hurley that has no water rights,” stated Siwik during her testimony at today’s ISC meeting.

The ISC also approved investigation of “how the Gila Basin Irrigation Commission Diversion and Storage, Deming Diversion, and Hidalgo County Diversion and Storage proposals might be combined or refined to realize the greatest synergies and best meet agricultural, municipal, and environmental needs.”

“A costly, unnecessary diversion, dam and pipeline would forever change the Gila River’s unique ecology, compromising the economic, environmental and recreational benefits the Gila provides and put a financial burden on local water users for decades to come,” explained GCC chairman Dutch Salmon. “Not only has there been no demonstrated need for Gila River water, but we can’t afford the \$325 million dollar price tag to build a diversion project. Even after using the AWSA subsidy of up to \$128 million, water users must still come up with \$200 million to pay the remainder of the construction costs, an annual exchange cost of at least \$1.7 million/year and annual operation and maintenance costs of \$5 – 6 million. We question if anyone in southwest New Mexico can pay for this expensive water.”

The ISC also approved assessment of the Luna, Pleasanton, and Sunset and New Model ditch improvement proposals. Along with drip irrigation approved for study at the September 2011 ISC meeting, agricultural conservation has the potential to significantly improve irrigation efficiency and reduce water demand from the agricultural sector, the largest water user in the four-county area.

The ISC also approved working with independent professional experts to assess how best to integrate and refine the various watershed proposals to realize the greatest synergies and benefits, as well as further assessment of the Deming Effluent Reuse proposal.

Over 15 people provided public comment on the ISC decision to a packed conference room, including Mitch Hellman, Silver City businessman and owner of Alotta Gelato, who presented a letter to commissioners on behalf of 120 businesses in southwest New Mexico and the Southwest New Mexico Green Chamber of Commerce, urging the commissioners to approve responsible, cost-effective non-diversion alternatives for evaluation as the Gila River is critical to the tourist economy of the region.

Lois Fuller, Catron County resident, told commissioners that the Gila National Forest and the Gila and San Francisco rivers are “the heart of the whole area. Our economy will suffer if a diversion project goes through. Economic benefit to our local communities is on the line.”

Donna Stevens, director of the Upper Gila Watershed Alliance and a partner in the Gila Conservation Coalition, stated that GCC’s Rosgen diversion proposal “represents a win-win solution for Cliff-Gila Valley irrigators and the Gila River.” Redesigning irrigation ditch diversions following a Rosgen-style cross-vane design allows for maintenance of instream flow while also meeting the water needs of irrigators. This concept will be analyzed further as part of the Gila Basin Irrigation Commission’s proposal.

Siwik encouraged ISC commissioners to consider that there is enough AWSA funding available as part of the \$66M to fund all of the non-diversion alternatives currently on the Tier 2 list, benefiting farmers, ranchers, municipalities, industry and the environment throughout southwest new Mexico. “The non-diversion projects provide real solutions for southwest New Mexico’s long-term water needs at a fraction of the cost of a large-scale diversion project and most received strong support at the recent multi-stakeholder New Mexico First Town Hall meeting.”

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