

**MINUTES
of the
SECOND MEETING
of the
WATER AND NATURAL RESOURCES COMMITTEE**

**July 1-2, 2025
New Mexico Highlands University
Student Union Ballroom
Las Vegas**

The second meeting of the Water and Natural Resources Committee was called to order by Senator Elizabeth "Liz" Stefanics, chair, on Tuesday, July 1, 2025, at 9:37 a.m. in the Student Union Ballroom at New Mexico Highlands University (NMHU) in Las Vegas.

Present

Sen. Elizabeth "Liz" Stefanics, Chair
Rep. Matthew McQueen, Vice Chair
Rep. Micaela Lara Cadena
Sen. Pete Campos
Rep. Kathleen Cates
Rep. Miguel P. García (7/1)
Rep. Jonathan A. Henry
Rep. Debra M. Sariñana
Sen. Larry R. Scott
Rep. Elaine Sena Cortez
Rep. Martin R. Zamora (7/1)

Advisory Members

Sen. Craig W. Brandt
Rep. Jack Chatfield
Rep. Charlotte Little
Rep. Tara L. Lujan (7/2)
Rep. Angelita Mejia
Rep. Tanya Mirabal Moya
Rep. Rod Montoya
Sen. Antoinette Sedillo Lopez
Rep. Harlan Vincent

Absent

Sen. Joseph Cervantes
Sen. Candy Spence Ezzell
Rep. Joseph Franklin Hernandez
Rep. D. Wonda Johnson
Rep. Marian Matthews
Sen. Micaelita Debbie O'Malley
Rep. Kristina Ortez
Rep. Angelica Rubio
Sen. Jeff Steinborn
Sen. James G. Townsend

Rep. Gail Armstrong
Sen. Angel M. Charley
Rep. Nicole Chavez
Rep. Eleanor Chávez
Rep. Meredith A. Dixon
Rep. Joanne J. Ferrary
Rep. Martha Garcia
Sen. Linda M. López
Rep. Stefani Lord
Sen. Antonio Maestas
Rep. Javier Martínez
Rep. Mark B. Murphy
Rep. Randall T. Pettigrew
Rep. Patricia Roybal Caballero
Rep. Nathan P. Small
Sen. Mimi Stewart
Sen. Anthony L. Thornton
Sen. Peter Wirth
Sen. Pat Woods

Guest Legislator

Rep. Anita Gonzales

(Attendance dates are noted for members not present for the entire meeting.)

Staff

Sara Wiedmaier, Researcher, Legislative Council Service (LCS)

Ian Keller, Staff Attorney, LCS

Angela Dakan, Staff, LCS

Guests

The guest list is in the meeting file.

Handouts

Handouts and other written testimony are in the meeting file and posted on the legislature's website.

References to Webcast

The time reference noted next to each agenda item in this document is cross-referenced to the recorded webcast of the committee meeting, which can be found at www.nmlegis.gov, under the "Webcast" tab. The presentations made and committee discussions for agenda items can be found on the recorded webcast for this meeting.

Tuesday, July 1**Welcome and Introductions (9:37 a.m.)**

Senator Stefanics welcomed everyone, and committee members introduced themselves.

Welcome and Local Updates (9:50 a.m.)

Neil Woolf, Ed.D., president, NMHU, presented information on projects and programs at NMHU, including new doctorate programs and collaborations on issues concerning water systems, economic development, housing and reforestation.

David Romero, mayor, City of Las Vegas, discussed the enduring challenges from the Hermit's Peak/Calf Canyon (HPCC) fire and subsequent flooding that impacted the city's water supply and infrastructure. He highlighted a successful river cleanup project and said that the city is bracing for future flooding this summer.

Approval of Minutes (10:38 a.m.)

On a motion made and seconded, the minutes of the June 3, 2025 meeting were adopted.

Acequia Disaster Recovery Efforts (10:40 a.m.)

Paula Garcia, executive director, New Mexico Acequia Association, discussed recovery efforts for acequias damaged by wildfires and floods since 2022 and provided policy

recommendations that include expanding state resources for specialized technical assistance. Debbie Hughes, executive director, New Mexico Association of Conservation Districts, discussed acequia damage assessments after the HPCC fire and local implementation of the federal Emergency Watershed Protection Program. She noted important partnerships made amid cuts to the federal Natural Resources Conservation Service and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).

John Romero, director, Highway Operations Support Division, Department of Transportation (DOT), discussed the DOT's acequia recovery work since the HPCC and Black wildfires, noting challenges with up-front costs and administrative workload.

Jonathan Martinez, chief, Acequia Bureau, Interstate Stream Commission, gave an overview of the Acequia and Community Ditch Infrastructure Fund, which helps meet cost-share requirements of infrastructure projects and provides for assistance with hazard mitigation and disaster recovery. The presentation materials can be found here:

<https://www.nmlegis.gov/Committee/Handouts?CommitteeCode=WNR&Date=7/1/2025&ItemNumber=2>.

Public Comment

There was no public comment.

Northeastern New Mexico Dams: Current Projects and Statewide Priorities (12:55 p.m.)

John T. Romero, P.E., director, Water Resource Allocation Program and Water Rights Division, Office of the State Engineer (OSE), recommended legislation to increase penalties for violations of water laws. Sushil Chaudhary, D.Eng., P.E., chief, Dam Safety Bureau, OSE, presented an overview of state-regulated dams, which he said have a mean age of 64 years and the majority of which have high hazard potential due to lack of routine maintenance. He described the condition of dams in the northeast part of the state, including urgent situations at the Cimarroncito, Eagle Nest and Lake Maloya dams in Colfax County. The presentation materials can be found here:

<https://www.nmlegis.gov/Committee/Handouts?CommitteeCode=WNR&Date=7/1/2025&ItemNumber=3>.

HPCC Fire Recovery and Funding Status (2:00 p.m.)

Emily Hilla, program evaluator, Legislative Finance Committee, gave a brief update on wildfire recovery funding provided by Senate Bill 6 (2023) and House Bill 1 (2024, 1st Special Session) and the status of federal reimbursements. She said that competing priorities emerging from post-fire flooding events have impacted effective utilization of the funding.

Ali Rye, state director and deputy secretary, Homeland Security and Emergency Management Department (DHSEM), explained the DHSEM's role in ensuring that emergency funding is used appropriately. She said that FEMA is keeping incident periods for the HPCC,

Salt and South Fork fires open so funds can be acquired as late damage occurs from post-fire hazards. Jeremy Klass, bureau chief, Recovery and Mitigation Bureau, DHSEM, briefly discussed collaborating with other states and the federal government to enhance wildfire resiliency across the region and address post-fire impacts in the state.

Mayor Romero stated that post-fire cascading events have made commencing recovery projects difficult. He said that the city's main focus is protecting the watershed, which has hindered the documentation of emergency funds used for temporary water treatment and debris cleanup projects. The presentation materials can be found here:

<https://www.nmlegis.gov/Committee/Handouts?CommitteeCode=WNR&Date=7/1/2025&ItemNumber=4>.

Drinking Water Systems Impacted by Fires, Floods and Drought (3:03 p.m.)

Jonas Armstrong, director, Water Protection Division, Department of Environment (NMED), and Joe Martinez, chief, Drinking Water Bureau, Water Protection Division, NMED, discussed the impacts to water systems and recovery efforts in Las Vegas and Ruidoso from post-wildfire flooding. Mr. Armstrong said that infrastructure fragility is the major cause of compounding disasters and recommended that communities and the state make appropriate investments in infrastructure, staff, training, oversight and data gathering. Bureau chief Martinez echoed the need for more water operators to respond to rapidly growing needs.

Travis Martinez, utilities director, City of Las Vegas, detailed the enduring challenges to the city's water infrastructure since the HPCC fire. He explained that the city and many state and federal entities are working on recovery efforts, but the cascading emergencies and financial impacts have been staggering. He advised other communities to plan for disasters by knowing a system's weak points, pre-positioning emergency contacts and assessing temporary treatment or backup water source options. He requested committee support for sustained, flexible funding and proactive investment in planning, workforce development and equipment. Robert Anaya, city manager, City of Las Vegas, added that a framework and time line for an improved city water system is being developed and acknowledged that more accountability for emergency state funds is needed. The presentation materials can be found here:

<https://www.nmlegis.gov/Committee/Handouts?CommitteeCode=WNR&Date=7/1/2025&ItemNumber=5>.

San Juan Generating Station (SJGS) and Mine Remediation and Restoration Study Report (4:01 p.m.)

John Ayarbe, senior hydrologist, Daniel B. Stephens & Associates, discussed environmental conditions at the former SJGS. He said that the current ground water quality is poor, but the existing mine closure plan is adequate and once reclamation is complete, ground water levels are expected to recover.

Mr. Armstrong and George Schuman, program manager, Remediation Oversight Section, Ground Water Quality Bureau, Water Protection Division, NMED, discussed oversight of the decommissioning of the SJGS. Mr. Armstrong said that ground water contamination is the primary environmental concern at the site, and the bureau is monitoring the effectiveness of remediation. Mr. Schuman said that 50 years of permit data has been gathered, but new data is needed to fill in gaps and determine how best to investigate the entire 200-acre site.

Sherrick Roanhorse, senior government affairs manager, Public Service Company of New Mexico (PNM), said that while PNM is in the early stages of SJGS site negotiations, PNM is committed to and currently working with the NMED and stakeholders on remediation and restoration of the site. The presentation materials can be found here:

<https://www.nmlegis.gov/Committee/Handouts?CommitteeCode=WNR&Date=7/1/2025&ItemNumber=6>.

Recess

The meeting recessed at 4:45 p.m.

Wednesday, July 2

Reconvene

The meeting reconvened at 9:04 a.m.

Post-Fire Flood Issues (9:06 a.m.)

Mr. Armstrong explained that the NMED has provided hundreds of hours of technical assistance following recent disasters and that affected water systems in general have been stabilized. He said that the NMED continues to provide assistance as issues arise to maintain compliance and manage communities' responsibility to provide safe, reliable drinking water and discussed available funding to help prepare for water emergencies.

Mr. Klass discussed how the DHSEM is addressing watershed restoration after recent disasters by integrating local emergency operations with incident management teams and developing technologies to address immediate needs. He said that federal programs are not structured to address the cascading impacts inherent in post-fire landscapes, and there is apprehension about the future of federal funding. He expressed the need for more state investment in emergency management and coordination across agencies and states in the region.

DOT division director Romero discussed damages to roadways, bridges and drainage structures from post-fire floods and major recovery work that has been completed. He explained that the DOT performs a majority of emergency repairs in-house because it is faster and less expensive and it helps to cross-train new employees. He stated that some areas can take three or more years to stabilize after a wildfire and that repairs from the HPCC fire have cost the department \$122 million. He lauded the DOT's first-responder capabilities, pointing out that crews are trained to use certain firefighting equipment and assist with transporting materials, fuel

and water and opening old logging roads. He advocated for stabilization of the State Road Fund because use of the fund for emergencies is depleting resources for regular maintenance and construction. The presentation materials can be found here:

<https://www.nmlegis.gov/Committee/Handouts?CommitteeCode=WNR&Date=7/1/2025&ItemNumber=7>.

Forest Management: Reforestation Centers, Buffer Program Implementation and Economic Development (10:15 a.m.)

Laura McCarthy, state forester, Forestry Division, EMNRD, discussed protection of wildland-urban interfaces during wildfires. She briefly explained how buffers work, the mitigation mapping done by the Fire Planning Task Force and the effects of buffered areas. She also discussed a report from the Wildfire Study Group due by November 1, 2025 and a joint study by the EMNRD and the Economic Development Department for forest restoration through economic development.

Matt Hurteau, Ph.D., professor, Department of Biology, University of New Mexico, discussed challenges to reforestation after high-severity wildfires, such as having to manually replant trees, low survival rates and seedling and nursery shortages. He stated that outcomes could be improved by developing training for the collection and planting of seeds.

Owen Burney, Ph.D., professor, College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences, and director, John T. Harrington Forestry Research Center, New Mexico State University, discussed the reforestation needs of the state, which include seed collection, nursery production, planting, growth monitoring and more trained professionals. He stated that it would take more than 500 years to reforest with the state's current capacity, and ongoing research is needed to develop science-based solutions to gaps in the reforestation pipeline.

Peter Vigil, district manager, Taos Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD), discussed his work with public outreach, developing natural-resource policy and dealing with unpredictable climate issues in Taos. He stated that his primary role is to make land stewards out of landowners while educating landowners to teach others and engage with youth to continue that work. Gerald Romero, district manager, Tierra y Montes SWCD, talked about coordinating available resources to meet the needs of local land users and presented challenges to forest management, including funding, terrain and landowner participation. He recommended more funding for land-management agencies and implementing watershed-scale treatments across jurisdictional boundaries to make a bigger impact. The presentation materials can be found here:

<https://www.nmlegis.gov/Committee/Handouts?CommitteeCode=WNR&Date=7/1/2025&ItemNumber=8>.

Wildfire Prepared Act Implementation, Fire Planning Task Force Updates and the Fair Access to Insurance Requirements (FAIR) Plan (12:12 p.m.)

Ms. McCarthy briefly discussed the implementation of Senate Bill 33 (2025), including an update on the Fire Planning Task Force, technical standards and multipurpose mapping projects and the EMNRD's intention to adopt Insurance Institute for Business and Home Safety (IBHS) damage mitigation standards.

Alice Kane, superintendent of insurance, Office of Superintendent of Insurance, gave a brief update on the FAIR Plan, reporting that the insurance industry has increased homeowner and business policy cancellations and nonrenewals in areas considered high-risk for wildfires. She believes that there is an insurance-access crisis and that, because of emergency situations, access to insurance that has not traditionally been available is needed. She stated that policyholders could apply wildfire-mitigation measures to get back into the open market, noting that some companies will give a discount for such measures. She said the OSI supports legislation that would increase coverage limits and clarify coverage for certain excluded risks.

Julie Rochman, member, Fire Planning Task Force, and retired chief executive officer, IBHS, presented on effective ways to reduce property hazards from natural disasters, including building with Class A roofs, ember-resistant vents and defensible space, that could make properties more insurable and homeowners more willing to evacuate in an emergency.

Miles Conway, director, New Mexico Home Builders Association, discussed the cost of fire-mitigation standards in homebuilding. He listed ways in which New Mexico could be a model for other states, including creating programs in support of retrofits to existing structures and workforce training and certifications. He said that the state will have to find ways to balance affordability with fire resiliency and insurability and the conflict between high-density housing and the ideal standard of 50-foot separation between buildings.

Kendra Zacharias, chair, Governing Committee, New Mexico Property Insurance Program (NMPPI), gave a brief history of the FAIR Plan and explained that the NMPPI provides coverage only to qualified applicants that are unable to obtain property insurance in the open market. She discussed the types of coverage provided, rates and assessments and coverage limits. The presentation materials can be found here:

<https://www.nmlegis.gov/Committee/Handouts?CommitteeCode=WNR&Date=7/1/2025&ItemNumber=9>.

Public Comment

There was no public comment.

Adjournment

There being no further business before the committee, the meeting adjourned at 1:32 p.m.