

John Cornell Testimony

Drought Subcommittee-October 14, 2013

I'm John Cornell, Sierra County resident, President of DACAS, and spokesman for my fellow sportsmen and 15,000 members of the New Mexico Wildlife Federation (NMWF), founded by Aldo Leopold in 1914.

The NMWF opposes a partially funded federal diversion and interbasin water transfer and pipeline on the Gila River, New Mexico's last natural, free-flowing river. We do support expenditure of the tens of millions of available federal funding on locally identified water supply projects that fill the gap, are smart, cost-effective and long-term solutions to meeting the four southwestern counties water needs.

Sportsmen play a pivotal role in supporting New Mexico's economy. In 2011, 304,000 hunters and anglers contributed \$579 million to New Mexico's economy, \$40 million more than the combined receipts for pecans, hay, cotton, corn and chile peppers.

A healthy Gila Watershed is important to the sportsmen, the southwestern economy and its rich natural heritage. It's home to the nation's first Wilderness area and is the last mainstem river in New Mexico without a major holding or diversion dam. Recognized as "the only warm-water trout fishery in America" by Fly Rod & Reel magazine, the Gila drainage is home to the federally threatened Gila trout, now open to fishing on a limited basis and on the bucket list of many an in-state as well as out-of-state angler. Historically, the Gila trout was found as far downstream as the Mogollon Creek confluence. Game fish such as channel and flathead catfish and near-record smallmouth bass are prevalent along with endemic species like roundtail chub, Sonora sucker, spike dace and loach minnow.

Among the big game and wildlife found in the unique habitat of roadless hills, farm land, riparian forest and natural stream, are deer, elk, javelina, coatimundi, bear and puma. The Rocky Mountain Bighorn Sheep deserves special mention. A small herd of 25 to 50 wild sheep have long occupied The Box; they are not hunted at present but elsewhere in the state hunters wait in line and pay thousands of dollars apiece for a single "sheep tag." The undeveloped habitat in and near The Box has the space and presumably the conditions to accommodate more sheep and possibly limited trophy hunting one day. Consider the prospects for habitat, sheep and sheep

hunting if the bighorn herd is driven out by the proposed federal water diversion, and associated storage and delivery infrastructure.

The Bureau of Reclamation and ISC are considering building a diversion dam in the Upper Box. The diverted water would be delivered through large canals and rights-of-way down both sides of the river to a 30,000 acre-foot off-stream storage reservoir, 15-20 miles downstream in Mangas Creek, one of the last refugia for the endangered loach minnow. Losing about 25% of its original capture through evaporation, that's money down the drain (or actually to Arizona). The Arizona Water Settlement Act requires New Mexico replace every drop we divert by purchasing an equivalent amount from the Central Arizona Project for the downstream Gila River Indian Community and other Arizona Gila water users. The current price for Central Arizona Water is \$129 per acre-foot, much, much more than what Grant and Catron farmers currently pay in ditch fees.

Too expensive for farmers to want to pay, Gila water would not be used by southwestern farmers but be pumped out of the Gila River Basin and over the Continental Divide for municipal use in the Mimbres River Basin or perhaps 140 miles to the Rio Grande Basin. That is a lot of pumping costs. Construction alone will not be covered by the partial federal subsidy. The available federal subsidy of \$100 million is less than half of the estimated cost of construction. This partially funded federal water project will impact our state budget, and likely increase local taxes and water utility rates. Presumably tax payers and water users will have to foot the bill to the tune of 100's of millions of dollars.

As in the Animas-La Plata Project, federal water projects have a long history of expensive cost overruns. The project cost estimate at time of federal approval in 2000 was \$338 million, but when completed in 2003 they spent \$500 million – a 48% real increase in costs. The Animas is just one illustration.

New Mexico has the choice to use available federal funding for non-diversion, water supply projects. Cheaper, and long-term solutions, these non-diversion water supply projects have been put forward by southwestern irrigation community ditches, Grant County, soil and water conservation districts and state research universities: projects like water conservation, efficiency, re-use, sustainable groundwater pumping and watershed restoration. They can fill the gap and meet the needs of southwestern New Mexico communities, industry, ranchers and irrigators. The ISC and Bureau of Reclamation are evaluating \$82 million in non-diversion alternatives that can produce or save 22,000 acre-feet of water annually if implemented. These

cost-effective projects can easily be paid for with the available non-reimbursable AWSA federal funding and won't cause a burden to the taxpayer or water user. At the same time, they will protect the Gila River's rich natural heritage and its ecological, economic and recreational values.

The Mimbres River Basin, one of the proposed destinations of an out-of-basin water transfer and Gila River pipeline, sits on top of a large potable aquifer – water safe for drinking. This aquifer supplies water to the two largest cities in the four southwestern counties: Silver City and Deming. The Regional Water Plan and State Engineer estimate it contains between 40 to 75 million acre-feet. This aquifer level is not dropping; a recent report by the USGS indicates that the Mimbres Basin is at or close to a state of equilibrium between withdrawals and recharge, leaving both communities better off pumping groundwater. This is exactly what Grant County is proposing under its non-diversion alternative water supply project – a long-term solution.

The Lower Rio Grande Ag industry is hurting from the drought and an increase in total acreage of pecan orchards – a fixed demand crop that uses a lot of water – and farmers and the community are looking for long-term solutions to this problem. But a pipeline from the Gila River will not solve the Lower Rio Grande water supply problems. The Gila River diversion and pipeline would augment existing surface water supply from the Elephant Butte Reservoir by just over 3%, assuming the Gila River diversion has no losses and reliably diverts 14,000 acre-ft per year. Even with the Gila River water, there would not be enough water to continue farming the Lower Rio Grande if the drought persists. The Gila River diversion is not a long-term solution to the water supply issues facing the Rio Grande. It's a band-aid, harmful to the southwestern four counties, who would lose their rich natural heritage and Gila River water.

Sportsmen are not alone in rejecting river diversion in favor of non-diversion water supply projects. The state legislature should encourage the NMISC to decline the partially funded federal diversion and elect non-diversion water supply alternatives. It is the right call, the cheapest call, and the smartest call.