

Water and drought: a call for cooperation

By U.S. Sen. Tom Udall /
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The people of New Mexico have long been very water conscious. We have had to be. Our survival has depended on it. Water is the "don divino," the divine gift. It is the lifeblood of our communities. The native pueblos who settled along the Rio Grande understood this. So did the early Spanish settlers who built the acequias to irrigate their crops.

Today, we are in the worst drought in over half a century. Projections are for hotter and drier conditions to continue.

Groundwater levels are dropping. The challenge this presents to our economy and our quality of life cannot be understated.

Last August, I was proud to co-host the 57th Annual New Mexico Water Conference at New Mexico State University in Las Cruces. Five hundred participants gave freely of their time. We heard from panels of experts. We met with farmers, ranchers, engineers, conservationists and community members. It was an opportunity to have a healthy dialogue about an issue that is so important to the future of our state.

Since the conference, my office has been compiling the strategies and proposals that were discussed. I was pleased recently to release our Water Conference Report. The report contains 40 proposed actions to help New Mexico adapt to ongoing drought and water supply challenges. It also contains 40 additional recommendations by audience members from the conference. I encourage everyone to read the report at my website, www.tomudall.senate.gov.

There is much work to do. And in today's tough economic times we will have to fight for the funding to do it. I will continue to advocate for federal funding for drinking water and water treatment for financially struggling communities in our state.

Congress should fully fund the Secure Water Act, which helps communities assess existing water supplies, especially groundwater, and better plan for the future. We need to know how much water we have in order to avoid over allocation and to ensure sustainable use.

We also need to pass a Farm Bill and restore the vital disaster assistance programs that expired in 2011. New Mexico's farmers and ranchers have been hit hard by drought, and this assistance is long overdue.

New technology offers great promise, but will not be a cure-all that avoids hard choices. Desalination research is underway in New Mexico, but on a large scale the cost and energy use remain high hurdles. The conference report also calls for improved management of dams and reservoirs for both agricultural and environmental purposes. These interests are not mutually exclusive. Water in the river can support wildlife and agriculture downstream. Groups who are often at odds need to work together — and there are promising examples of this, such as the New Mexico Audubon Society and the Elephant Butte Irrigation District.

Our report also recommended pilot voluntary water transfer programs to encourage best practices in this promising, but controversial, way to allocate supply. I think we should be skeptical, however, of large scale, permanent transfers, especially outside a particular basin, and from rural to urban areas.

Further, greater scrutiny is advised for new large water projects, such as those involving the Gila River, where massive federal investments are unlikely to materialize. The Gila is the last wild river in New Mexico and one of the few in the nation. As the conference title suggested, hard choices will have to be made if we are to avoid the divisive conflicts of devastating drought. The conference report is a positive step. But, it is not the end of the conversation. It is the continuation of it, and I want to hear from all New Mexicans about their water future.

We hear a lot about water "wars." But one big message came through time and again from participants at the water conference. Cooperation is key. That is how we will move forward. The challenge is clear. The stakes are high. Our efforts will have to be focused, innovative, and resolute. The people of New Mexico deserve no less.

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Tom Udall is the senior senator from New Mexico. He serves on the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Energy and Water Development, and on the Environment and Public Works committee.