



Low Rio Grande flow impacts Taos

By J.R. Logan

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When the Rio Grande entered the San Lu's Valley in Colorado Tuesday (April 30), it was running at a swift 1,820 cubic feet per second (cfs). But when it hit the state line and crossed into New Mexico, it was at just 55 cfs.

For rafting guides in Taos County, the gaunt river flow through the Rio Grande Gorge hits their businesses hard. "It's damaged our ability to sell a product to tourists and create an economic boost to Taos County," says Cisco Guevara, owner of Los Rios River Runners.

In recent weeks, Guevara has been especially outspoken about what he sees as an unfair agreement over sharing water that he believes hurts New Mexico — especially Taos County.

This time of year, the headwaters of the Rio Grande start to swell with runoff from the San Juan Mountains above Del Norte, Colo. But once the river hits the San Lu's Valley, farmers this year are pulling 94 percent of the water to irrigate thirsty crops like alfalfa, which is selling at record prices.

What's left when the river crosses into New Mexico is a trickle compared to the flow 100 miles upstream.

The 1938 Rio Grande Compact dictates how water from the Rio Grande is shared among Colorado, New Mexico and Texas. But in drought years, Colorado's annual obligation to New Mexico drops.

Craig Cotten is with the Colorado Division of Water Resources. His agency is charged with calculating how much water can be diverted from the Rio Grande before it leaves the state.

According to Cotten, the flows on the Rio Grande are expected to be about 50 percent of normal this year. Under the Compact, he says Colorado is only required to deliver 21 percent of the water in the Rio Grande to New Mexico in 2013. Because their obligation to New Mexico is tallied over the whole year, Cotten says Coloradans normally let 100 percent of the river flow to New Mexico in winter when it's not needed to irrigate (and few people are rafting). But come spring, farmers pump like crazy to ensure a good crop yield.

The trouble for outfitters like Guevara is that the major irrigation coincides with the start of his rafting season. While river levels are expected to rise somewhat as the weather warms (streamflow gauges spiked earlier this week when temperatures rose), guides don't expect this to be anything close to a banner year on the Rio Grande.

From the state line flow of 55 cfs Monday, the Rio Grande jumped to 238 cfs just beyond the river's confluence with the Rio Pueblo, thanks to tributary streams and springs. That flow rate is still just a third of the median for this time of year.

Guevara says it's enough water for a relatively mild float through lower rafting sections like the Race Course

below Pilar, where raft trips are already happening. But he says avid white-water enthusiasts prefer to run the Taos Box section of the river, which covers a particularly remote and thrilling section of the recently designated Rio Grande del Norte National Monument.

“At high water, when The Box comes up, it’s like the jungle drums start going,” says Billy Blackstock, with Far Flung Adventures. “Everybody calls and everybody’s busy.”

Unfortunately for the guides, the river flow needs to be at least five times as high as it was Tuesday before The Box is even close to runnable, Guevara says, and it may only hit that mark for a couple weeks this year at the peak of runoff. That’s a short window to market to people who might be excited to visit one of the highlights of the brand new national monument.

Instead, river flow right now is perfect for a casual float with families and kids, Guevara says. “We have a product to sell, but it’s limited when you can’t do the world famous Taos Box,” he says.

Steve Miller, from New Wave Rafting, says not running The Box can cut his business by as much as half, meaning he hires fewer people and can accommodate fewer guests. “It puts a real dent in the business,” Miller says.

Like Guevara, Miller said the recent monument designation could lead to some changes in how water is allocated. The presidential proclamation establishing the monument specifically says it does not affect existing water agreements, but Miller said the federal government may have increased interest in ensuring decent river flow through the gorge. Still, it’s unclear how much clout a handful of rafting companies will have when it comes to convincing Colorado farmers to give up valuable irrigation water. As Miller put it, those farmers “measure their water by the teaspoon,” and aren’t likely to give anything up.

While there are some local efforts to alter delicate water pacts, no one expects things to change soon, meaning low stream flows will continue to be the status quo during drought.

Embudo river guide Billy Miller owns Big River Raft Trips and says he’s counting on the streamflow to stay low throughout his season, and he even bought new rafts to handle shallower water.

Miller says surviving as a business means attracting the right group. “The people who know about whitewater — the 33-year-old adrenaline junkie — that guy doesn’t go rafting this year, but his family does,” Miller says.

While reservations in a dry year tend to be down, Miller expects to pick up plenty of walk-in clients who decide to go rafting as a part of a trip to the area.

Aside from his business, Miller worries about the health of the river during times of low streamflow. He’s concerned about the health of riparian areas on the riverbank that rely on water to allow flora and fauna to survive in an otherwise arid environment. If the ecological health of the greenbelt along the river is endangered, it could be another blow to the river and the guides trying to capitalize on National Monument status to bring new visitors to Taos.

“It affects everything,” Miller says. “If there’s no water, there’s no tourists. If there’s no tourists, there’s no money.”

