

Taos Regional Water Plan update

By Meg Scherch Peterson

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The draft of the Taos Regional Water Plan Update (RWP), in the works for more than a year, was among the first eight plans reviewed by the Interstate Stream Commission (ISC) and released back to the Taos RWP Steering Committee for the next phase of the process.

Deborah Dixon, director of the ISC, made the announcement at New Mexico Water Dialogue's 22nd Annual Statewide Meeting, Thursday, Jan. 7, at the Indian Pueblo Cultural Center in Albuquerque.

"All 16 regional draft plans will be released by the end of this month," she said, adding, "By golly, we hope they have value."

The state Legislature in 2013 charged the ISC with updating the State Water Plan largely because of extended drought. And updating the state plan meant updating the regional plans that fold into it. In addition, Dixon said, "We updated the process," calling the timeline "ambitious."

Not everyone has been enthusiastic about the streamlined process, which entailed consistent formatting across all plans as well as a simultaneous acceptance process. Angela Bordegaray, water planner for the ISC, said the commission was on track to review and accept all the plans by the end of 2016.

But one participant, an acequia mayordomo from the middle R'io Grande, called the process "dictatorial, top down and force fed."

"Each region has its unique needs. We will look at the process again, and we will try to continue to improve it," said Dixon.

Earlier in the day, Sen. Peter Wirth, D-Santa Fe, spoke about the need to change how members of the ISC are appointed. Presently, eight members of the nine-member commission are appointed by the governor. The ninth member, the state engineer, is also appointed by the governor.

He acknowledged that "we need a balanced appointment process ... less subject to the wild swings" in politics every time a new governor is elected.

Restructuring and governance were also the themes of a presentation by John Brown, member of the Middle Rio Grande Water Assembly and New Mexico Water Dialogue Board. He argued that regional steering committees should have a permanent operational framework with real authority.

Norm Gaume, water resources consulting engineer, spoke about the overall “suspension of hydrologic reality” of three controversial projects in the state: the Gila River diversion, the Santolina development west of Albuquerque and the scheme to export groundwater from the plains of San Agustin.

The most passionate spokeswoman was perhaps Virginia Necochea, active in the South Valley Acequia Association and executive director of the Center for Social Sustainable Systems.

She said Santolina is symbolic of a larger battle that pits small farming communities against large corporate interests.

Taos County Water Committee member Robert Romero, who attended the meeting along with Mario Barela, was complimentary of the broad stakeholder involvement in Taos, though he acknowledged the update process this time around is largely run through the state. The Taos region includes Taos County and a sliver of Rio Arriba County.

Each region is supported by a facilitator and a hydrologist contracted by the state. Rosemary Romero, who guided Taos toward its first plan in 2008, is on board as facilitator again, together with Joanne Hilton. The esteemed Allen Vigil, who chaired the Steering Committee until his recent death, is replaced by co-chairs Rick Bellis, town of Taos manager, and Nathan Sanchez, Taos County planner. Sanchez said the present Steering Committee includes many of the members of the original one.

Among the next steps to be addressed by the committee will be a vision and recommendation document from the Watershed Subcommittee, led by Ernie Atencio, of Nature Conservancy, and Rachel Conn, projects director for Amigos Bravos.

“We are interested in incorporating into the plan update projects and policies that focus on preserving headwater wetlands and promoting green infrastructure and stream buffers as mechanisms for protecting our region’s future water supply,” said Conn.

Technical Subcommittee Chair Tony Benson will work within the state-developed technical platform to resolve any conflicts with data provided by the state. “We will continue to monitor water well levels around the county and monitor water well quality,” said Benson.

Carlos Miera is chair for the Acequia Subcommittee; Larry Szczech and Taos County Commissioner Candyce O’Donnell, mutual domestics; Simeon Herzkovits, public welfare statement.

The Steering Committee meets Thursday, Jan. 28, 10 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. at the Taos County Commission Chambers. These meetings are open to the public.