

Competing interests over Santa Fe River come to head once more

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The New Mexican

2017 11:30 pm | *Updated: 12:22 am, Tue Feb 7, 2017.*



Water taken from the Santa Fe River flows through the ‘historic channel’ that provides water to The Nature Conservancy preserve’s habitat. Clyde Mueller/The New Mexican



As the spring irrigation season approaches, competing interests are again haggling over water in the Santa Fe River, which is fed by releases from two city reservoirs.

Among the water users are two acequia associations, which have well-established water rights recognized by court order.

The associations are pitted against The Nature Conservancy, which wants to ensure that its 525-acre preserve, which some conservationists describe as a riparian gem in the eastside foothills adjacent to the Santa Fe National Forest, doesn’t dry up.

Residents who live downstream of Santa Fe also have an interest, including residents in the village of Agua Fría, where the river water is blessed around the day of San Ysidro, the patron saint of farmers.

All the competing river interests were there Monday when the city Public Works Committee held a two-hour public hearing and discussion on Santa Fe River water flows.

Under the city's Living River Ordinance, up to 1,000 acre feet of water is released annually into the river from the reservoirs in the Santa Fe Municipal Watershed, depending on the availability of water.

Members of the committee considered several options on how best to manage the flows but took no vote. Instead, they encouraged cooperation.

"There are a lot of people in the room that care about this and have great ideas," Councilor Chris Rivera said. "I do think we can all come together and come up with a solution that's going to benefit everybody and waste as little water as possible."

Discussions over Santa Fe River water flows are going to get more intense as weather patterns change and the availability of water is likely to diminish, according to a city report.

"The competition between the acequias and the living river for inflowing Santa Fe River water can be viewed as a precursor of the kinds of challenges the City will likely increasingly face in the future" as a result of climate change, the report states.

The report was initiated last year after an individual or individuals "vandalized" a head gate that controls the distribution of water, according to city documents.

The report was designed to provide the City Council "context and counsel on some of the legal and practical constraints on the Santa Fe River" and options the council may consider, Assistant City Attorney Marcos Martinez said.

"But most, if not all, of the options regarding what the city can and cannot do with the Santa Fe River boil down to the fact that there is more demand for water than there is the resource of water," he said.

Last year's vandalism sparked a nasty fight between The Nature Conservancy and the city, which abruptly cut off water flows into the conservancy's preserve. The city legal department also threatened to take legal action against the conservancy if it continued to siphon water from the river.

The Santa Fe River Commission, an advisory board to the mayor and city councilors, has recommended "further study to determine the water requirements for the preserve to maintain a healthy riparian ecosystem."

But in the short term, the commission recommends directing water flows to the preserve through what The Nature Conservancy calls the “historic channel,” which provides water to the preserve’s habitat, according to city documents.

The Acequia Madre de Santa Fe Community Acequia Association objects to diverting water through the historic channel rather than a bypass channel, which is designed to move water quickly, minimizing losses to evaporation and seepage, city documents state.

“During the 2016 irrigation season, [sending the water through the historic channel] prevented the acequias from receiving the water to which they are entitled and for which they have the most senior priorities,” Phillip Bové, a member of the acequia association, wrote in a letter to the city Public Works Committee and the Santa Fe River Commission.

“The Acequia Madre is prepared to work with the city and other stakeholders to try to maximize efficiency and use of available river flows,” he wrote. “However, the Acequia Madre is also prepared to take steps to ensure that it receives the water to which it is entitled and to protect the priority of its rights.”

Michael Gonzales, a former city Water Division employee who now serves as the mayordomo of the Cerro Gordo Ditch Association, said his group has always collaborated well with the Nature Conservancy and the Santa Fe Watershed Association.

“I’m encouraged by the fact that it’s not them against us,” he said, adding that scheduling of water flows and the accuracy of releases will be crucial, especially for the acequias, which are guaranteed certain quantities of water by court order.

“We’ve had 5 million gallons released for 24 hours sometimes, and we still are waiting for our release. It’s a day late,” he said. “It can get exceedingly dry and yet the Nature Conservancy will be flowing very nice.”

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