



# INSIGHT & OPINION

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# WATER IN OUR CONTROL

We don't want the feds to decide how we use our precious resource.  
Instead, we need a strategic reserve.

By Sue Wilson-Beffort  
and Carlos Cisneros

Bennett Raley, assistant secretary for the U.S. Department of Interior, recently delivered a sobering message to New Mexicans: Either settle your own water problems, or the federal government will step in and do the job for you.

Meanwhile, the Texas Legislature has built a \$10 million-plus litigation war chest to sue New Mexico if we ever under-deliver water from the Rio Grande to Texas. Any such underdelivery could result in the federal government ultimately taking control of water management on the Rio Grande and cutting off cities and other "junior" users.

Thus, New Mexico's escalating water crisis presents us with a critical choice: New Mexico can either allow the federal courts and other states dictate New Mexico's water policy, or we can maintain sovereignty over our water by establishing proactive water management tools and policies.

One of these tools should be a strategic water reserve. During the last New Mexico legislative session, we teamed up to sponsor bipartisan legislation to create one.

The legislation passed the House 47-6 and made it through two Senate committees before running out of time awaiting a hearing on the Senate floor. We plan to reintroduce this bill in January.

Our legislation is based on a report that Think New Mexico, the independent, statewide think tank, released last year calling for the creation of a strategic water reserve.

The bill would allow New Mexico's Interstate Stream Commission to establish a

## TODAY'S BYLINE

Wilson-Beffort and Cisneros are New Mexico state senators who wrote this article for Think New Mexico. Cisneros, a Questa Democrat, is chairman of the Senate Conservation Committee. Wilson-Beffort, an Albuquerque Republican, serves on the Senate Finance Committee. For more information on the Strategic Water Reserve, see the Web site at [www.thinknewmexico.org](http://www.thinknewmexico.org).

strategic water reserve by purchasing surface and groundwater rights from willing sellers at or below appraised market value. Acequia water, however, would be exempt.

The reserve would also be able to lease water or receive it through donation.

Water in the reserve would be used for two purposes. The first purpose is to ensure that New Mexico meets the demands of interstate river compacts like those with Texas.

The second purpose of the reserve is to help New Mexico comply with the U.S. Endangered Species Act. The reserve will allow us to meet the needs of the 22 federally listed river-dependent endangered species while protecting the state's existing water users, like cities, from being cut off by federal courts.

Funding to purchase these public water rights for the reserve would not entail an increase in taxes but would come instead from diverting 3 percent of the state's severance tax bonding capacity (about \$3 million to \$4.5 million annually) over a 20-year period.

This is consistent with the reform plan

Gov. Bill Richardson has championed to use more of our severance tax bonding capacity for critical statewide needs, like education and water, and less for local projects that some critics call "pork."

A strategic water reserve also fits within the overarching goals of Richardson's state water plan that was completed last year.

That plan calls for preserving New Mexico's control over our water, meeting interstate compact obligations and complying with the Endangered Species Act.

Who supports the strategic water reserve legislation? State Engineer John D'Antonio, Interstate Stream Commission Director Estevan Lopez and their predecessors, Tom Turney and Norman Gaume.

In addition, the strategic water reserve legislation has received the endorsements of agricultural (Rocky Mountain Farmers Union and the Middle Rio Grande Conservancy District), business (the Association of Commerce and Industry and the Albuquerque Economic Forum), sportsmen (New Mexico Trout and New Mexico Wildlife Federation) and environmental (Rio Grande Restoration, Amigos Bravos and Republicans for Environmental Protection) organizations.

The strategic water reserve is not a comprehensive solution to our water problems but rather a key piece of a balanced and sustainable water policy for New Mexico.

If you would like to join the effort to establish a strategic water reserve in New Mexico, please call or write your legislators. Let them know you support the creation of a strategic water reserve, which would benefit New Mexico's rivers and all of the people and communities who depend on them.