



# INSIGHT & OPINION

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## EDITORIAL

# Proposed river reserve just what state needs

It won't add any more water to New Mexico's primary surface water resource, the Rio Grande, but the proposed New Mexico Strategic River Reserve has the potential to shift water rights, helping the state establish its water priorities and manage them better.

With New Mexico's reservoirs depleted and the ravages of a long-term drought still stalking the state, this proposal could not be more timely and appropriate.

If approved by the Legislature in the upcoming session, it would allow state officials to lease or purchase water rights along the state's streams and rivers and from its subsurface groundwater supplies, banking them for future use.

The measure, while broadly supported, failed to clear the Legislature in the last session. This despite a looming water crisis that pits urban users against agricultural interests; New Mexican users against users from Texas and Mexico; and all human users against wildlife, most notably endangered species like the Rio Grande silvery minnow.

New Mexico cannot afford another missed opportunity like this. Establishing the Strategic River Reserve should

be at the top of the Legislature's priorities next month. There is precious little margin in the state's water supply, and the Rio Grande is the worst example of a collection of state water-rights claims that exceed the capability of nature to deliver.

The legislation would authorize New Mexico's Interstate Stream Commission — without any tax increase by tapping up to 3 percent of the state's severance tax bond capacity — to establish the state water reserve. The bank would be filled by purchasing or leasing surface and groundwater rights from willing sellers at or below appraised market values.

These water reserves will be used for two purposes: first, to ensure that the state meets its interstate water delivery obligations to Texas; and second, to abide by the federal Endangered Species Act, by providing sufficient water in rivers and streams to produce habitat for threatened or endangered species.

These are ethical and legal commitments that New Mexico cannot afford to ignore.

The Strategic River Reserve offers a significant step toward giving New Mexico greater control over its water-limited future.