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## Now's time to start saving up water rights

**S**trategic water reserve? It was a good idea last year, one that New Mexico legislators should have passed to give their constituents a good reason to re-elect them. But it got lost in the fast shuffle of a 30-day session. Fortunately, most representatives and senators in support of it are back at the Roundhouse.

And despite a relative abundance of rain and snow, our lawmakers surely are savvy enough to guess that the recent sogginess is only a temporary reprieve from a long-term drought — and that this corner of the Great American Desert tends to be pretty dry even when it's wet.

By now, there shouldn't be a member of either house who isn't concerned about water and what it means to New Mexico's future. And even the least conservation-minded among them must admit that our state has been remiss in establishing a sustainable relationship between agriculture, industry and commercial/residential development, on one hand, and water supplies on the other.

Yet water reform remains for many a Scarlett O'Hara subject: I can't think about that now. I'll go crazy if I do. I'll think about that tomorrow.

Tomorrow, or sometime soon, the thinking about it will be done not by New Mexico, but by neighboring states with claims to water running through our state — or, just as likely, the federal courts those states will petition for Solomonian decision-making about scarce Western water. Fiddle-dee-dee ...

Think New Mexico, that results-oriented bipartisan public-policy organization, was anticipating outside forces a couple of years ago as its community-minded members developed the idea of a water reserve, modeled roughly on our nation's strategic petroleum reserve.

The group sensibly proposes to give New Mexico's Interstate Stream Commission statutory power, and some money, to buy surface and groundwater rights from willing sellers — excluding acequia members — at reasonable prices.

Water in that reserve would help our state meet the demands of interstate-river compacts, notably those with lawyer-loaded Texas. For good measure, the water might be used to save the silvery minnow and otherwise comply with the federal Endangered Species Act.

A promising proposal, HB 195, just passed the House Energy and Natural Resources Committee. It would set aside 3 percent of the state's yearly severance-tax bond money over the next 20 years to begin building a pool of water rights along all our rivers.

That's the start our state needs to begin building a buffer against water crises sure to arise in times to come.

The bill faces two more House committees, and Senate action if it clears the whole House. It's a measure most legislators should get behind — one Gov. Bill Richardson has urged them to send him.

Future generations of New Mexicans will thank those who see the wisdom in a strategic water reserve.