

Title: **Strategic Water Reserve is a tool for these dry times**
 Author: Your Turn Kristina G. Fisher Guest columnist
 Size: 41.23 column inches
 Las Cruces, NM Circulation: 28086



Strategic Water Reserve is a tool for these dry times

Your Turn

Kristina G. Fisher
 Guest columnist

This spring, every part of New Mexico is suffering from drought, much of it extreme. Over 120 miles of the Rio Grande are projected to dry before the summer ends, leaving fish populations high and dry. Meanwhile, the Supreme Court recently held hearings in a lawsuit Texas filed claiming that New Mexico has used more than our share of the water in the lower Rio Grande.

To effectively address this mounting water crisis, New Mexico must increase its use of a powerful water management tool, the Strategic Water Reserve.

The Strategic Water Reserve was created in 2005 and consists of a pool of publicly held water rights, acquired by lease, purchase and donation. This water remains in New Mexico's rivers to help protect endangered species and fulfill our water delivery obligations to other states.

When the law creating the Strategic Water Reserve was passed, the need for this tool was clear. Environmentalists, farmers, and cities were battling in court over how much water had to be left in the Rio Grande for the endangered silvery minnow.

These lawsuits put federal courts, rather than local water managers, in the position of deciding how New Mexico's scarce water supplies would be distributed – and which users would be cut off when there wasn't enough to go around. Meanwhile, New Mexico was still paying a high price for violating one of the state's interstate river compacts, which require us to deliver a certain amount of water to downstream states.

In the 1970s, Texas sued New Mexico for failing to deliver enough water from the Pecos River. The Supreme Court ruled in favor of Texas, and New Mexico was forced to pay \$14 million – and then spend around

\$100 million buying water rights to make sure it wouldn't violate the compact in the future.

Texas is once again suing New Mexico, this time over the lower Rio Grande. New Mexico taxpayers have already spent about \$15 million fighting the lawsuit. The cost if the state loses could be astronomical.

The Strategic Water Reserve was designed to allow New Mexico to proactively resolve conflicts over interstate river compacts and endangered species, rather than having to pay for expensive fixes after the fact.

Since its creation, over 4,500 acre-feet of water on the Pecos River and just over 1,000 acre-feet in the middle Rio Grande have been placed into the Reserve.

The Reserve has received an average of less than half a million dollars per year, which has prevented it from acquiring enough water rights to make a decisive difference in situations like the one we now face on the lower Rio Grande. Even worse, the Strategic Water Reserve's fund has twice been emptied out to meet other financial needs of the state, forcing water managers to cut off negotiations to acquire water rights in critical stretches of the middle Rio Grande. The Reserve's fund is currently sitting empty.

When it comes to New Mexico's water, we can adequately fund the Strategic Water Reserve, or we can wait until after the crisis hits and pay a much higher price in dollars and disruption.

During the next legislative session, Think New Mexico will be advocating for sustained funding for the Strategic Water Reserve so that our state can make the most of this water management tool and resolve water conflicts before they become crises. To learn more about this effort and ask your legislators and the candidates for governor to support it, visit www.thinknewmexico.org.

Kristina G. Fisher is associate director of Think New Mexico, a results-oriented think tank serving New Mexicans.