

Gila Resources
Information
Project

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MISSION STATEMENT

Recognizing that human and environmental systems are inseparable and interdependent, Gila Resources Information Project pursues two goals: To protect and nurture human communities by safeguarding the natural resources that sustain us all; and to safeguard natural resources by facilitating informed public participation in resource use decisions.

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To become a member and receive a copy of Get A GRIP, a minimum donation of \$5.00 is appreciated. GRIP is a 501(c)(3), tax-exempt organization; your contribution is tax-deductible.

Your privacy is important to us. GRIP will never share your name or personal information without your consent.

Arizona Water Settlements Act Update Gila-San Francisco Coordinating Committee moves ahead with AWSA implementation

Almost two years ago, the Gila Settlement was signed into law as part of the Arizona Water Settlements Act (AWSA). The agreement allows New Mexico to divert up to 14,000 acre-feet per year from the Gila River and its tributary the San Francisco River and provides up to \$128 million in federal subsidy for construction of a water development project. The very prospect of "development" of New Mexico's last wild river is, of course, disturbing. How the state will realize its entitlement to Gila River water and federal subsidy under the AWSA hinges in part on the results of the Gila-San Francisco Coordinating Committee process that will continue over the next three years.

The Consumptive Use and Forbearance Agreement (CUFA) is the legal agreement under the Settlement that governs the conditions under which New Mexico can divert water without harming downstream senior water rights holders. The diversion parameters do not take into consideration minimum flows and other critical parameters necessary to protect the river's ecosystem. If water were diverted according to the CUFA, flows on the Gila River would be reduced primarily in winter and spring according to an analysis conducted by Nature Conservancy hydrologist Jeanmarie Haney(1). More data and research are needed to address more specifically the potential impacts to the ecological values of the river.

The process of determining the potential ecological implications of the CUFA is the task the Gila-San Francisco Coordinating Committee (GSFCC) is charged with overseeing. The NM Interstate Stream Commission entered into a Memorandum of Understanding with the federal Bureau of Reclamation and US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), Southwest New Mexico Water Planning Group and the Office of the Governor to establish the GSFCC. The group, comprised of these MOU signatories, will oversee and implement the process to "evaluate the environmental effects of potential water withdrawals under terms of the Consumptive Use and Forbearance Agreement" and show with "documented evidence that no irreversible harm will come to listed species" if water were to be diverted. A Coordination Act Report or Planning Aid Memorandum as required by the Endangered Species Act and developed by USFWS is expected to result from this process and would be available in 2009.

Subsequent to 2009 and dependent upon the recommendations of the USFWS Coordination Act Report or Planning Aid Memorandum, alternatives for use of Gila River water will be analyzed through the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process. The current schedule outlined by the NM Interstate Stream Commission plans for a record of decision regarding use of the water by 2015, five years earlier than what is contemplated in the AWSA.

Meetings of the GSFCC are scheduled for either the 2nd or the 3rd Tuesday of every month, rotating between southwestern New Mexico and Albuquerque or conference call. Meeting agendas and minutes are available on the Interstate Stream Commission website for the GSFCC (www.ose.state.nm.us/isc_colorado_gila_sanfran_committee.html).

The Technical Committee of the GSFCC is in the process of identifying gaps in the available science and will be issuing requests for proposals to conduct studies to augment what is currently known about the Gila-San Francisco watershed. Additionally, a Science Forum is planned for October 21 in Silver City (see Calendar of Events for more info) to learn from well-known scientists about their experiences with related water management issues and obtain their technical input on framing the decision process under the Gila Settlement.

Dutch Salmon, Gila Conservation Coalition chairman, serves on the committee as the alternate to Bill Hume, the governor's water policy lead. Dutch's involvement provides a seat at the table for the environmental and conservation community in this decision making process. GRIP is one of three organizations in the coalition.

(1) "Evaluation of the Ecological Implications of Altered Flows on the Upper Gila River. Extended abstract for the Arizona Hydrological Society, September 2005."