



2. Public Involvement

Public participation is an important component of the Southwest Region planning effort. This section describes the public participation process used in developing this regional water plan and provides the public welfare statement that was developed as part of the public process.

2.1 Public Involvement

Water planning efforts in the Southwest Region are overseen by a steering committee that has representation from:

- The four counties
- Ten municipalities
- Six Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCDs)
- Phelps Dodge and Duke Energy
- Several representatives from the public, including agricultural and watershed interests

The Southwest Region Steering Committee oversees all aspects of the regional water planning process and has been active in development of this water plan. Steering committee meetings are held every other month. All steering committee meetings are advertised in local newspapers and are open to the public, and each meeting allows time for public comment.

Additionally, eight public meetings were held as part of the development of this plan. Two public meetings were held in June 2003, one each in Lordsburg and Reserve (Hidalgo and Catron Counties), and two meetings were held in Silver City and Deming (Grant and Luna Counties) in September 2003. The focus of the 2003 public meetings was to educate and inform citizens in the Southwest Region regarding the regional water planning process and water supply and demand in the region and to solicit feedback from the public regarding major water concerns and ways to maximize public involvement in ongoing regional water planning efforts. Four public meetings were also held in October 2004, one each in Catron, Grant, Hidalgo and Luna Counties. Attendance at meetings was variable.



In addition to the steering committee and public meetings, public involvement in the regional water planning process is facilitated by providing key regional water planning documents in public locations, including libraries and/or government offices in each county. Also, fact sheets on water supply, water demand, population projections, and legal issues, and a brochure on the Southwest Region water planning effort were prepared and distributed at public meetings and steering committee meetings. Public participation is further documented in Appendix B.

2.2 Public Welfare

In 1987, the New Mexico legislature amended a number of water statutes to give the State Engineer authority to deny an application for a new water right or a water right transfer if it is contrary to conservation of water or detrimental to the public welfare of the state. The legislature did not define public welfare, nor has the OSE or the ISC. However, a definition of public welfare, adopted by a region could provide the OSE guidance with respect to processing water rights applications. Should a proposed water right application appear to be contrary to a regionally defined public welfare criterion, the OSE could potentially rely on this criterion to deny or place a condition on an application. In this way, the public welfare statement is a potential mechanism for protecting regional values.

At the November 2004 Steering Committee meeting, the Steering Committee adopted the following definition of public welfare for the Southwest Planning Region

The Southwest Regional Water Planning Steering Committee recognizes the unique values of the diverse ecology of the Gila Basin and other surface water resources in the region. In implementation of the alternatives and recommendations put forth in this plan, the Steering Committee recommends use of the best available science to fully assess the ecological impacts of any water utilization project in Southwest New Mexico, including the Gila River, its tributaries and associated riparian corridors, and to also consider the traditions, cultures and customs affecting historic uses of and future demands for water in the Region.

Other public welfare values that are important to the region include:



- Health and safety
- Economic consequences, including impacts on the existing economy and area of origin of water rights, maintenance of traditional rural and agricultural economies, recreation, and external costs
- Encouragement of conservation and discouragement of waste or impractical or unreasonable uses of water
- Environmental and ecological consequences, including impacts on fish, wildlife and plants, ecologically critical areas, riparian ecosystems, wetlands, and watershed management
- Sustainability, sustained yield, groundwater recharge, and aquifer management
- Water quality protection and improvement
- Protection and enhancement of historic, cultural, and natural resources and aesthetic values
- Preservation of public and trust lands, water, and open space