

Arizonans surprised by Gila diversion, lack of info

Written by Benjamin Fisher on July 7, 2018

CHANDLER, Ariz.—The few folks who attended the New Mexico Interstate Stream Commission and U.S. Bureau of Reclamation's second scoping meeting for the proposed diversion project in southwest New Mexico, held in Chandler, Ariz., Friday evening, were largely surprised to have just heard of the project, since it would divert water that would otherwise flow into Arizona. They also repeated complaints heard at the first scoping meeting in Albuquerque, that actual information at the open-house meetings is inadequate.

Reclamation and the ISC — joint lead agencies on the required, ongoing National Environmental Policy Act environmental impact statement for the controversial diversion project — planned a series of meetings to gather public input all along the Gila River as part of the NEPA scoping process. And, since much of the length of the Gila and San Francisco rivers runs in Arizona as well as in New Mexico, that meant sessions in New Mexico's western neighbor. Those began Friday in Chandler and will continue today in San Carlos.

The New Mexico Unit of the Central Arizona Project, being planned by the N.M. CAP Entity — made up of governmental entities from the southwestern four counties of New Mexico — was allowed by the Arizona Water Settlements Act of 2004. But, according to Phoenix-area residents at the Friday meeting, any news of the project's long-delayed and embattled progress slowed to a trickle around that time.

"I imagine if you polled the population of Arizona, less than 1 percent of people would know there was going to be a New Mexico Unit of the Central Arizona Project," said Gilbert resident Mike Evans, who heard of Friday's meeting through the Desert Rivers Chapter of the Audubon Society. "I don't know what people's reaction would be if they knew more water was going to be diverted. The idea of putting more straws in it to suck more water out in the worst droughts Arizona and New Mexico have had maybe isn't the wisest idea. But that's me."

"I got a lot of clarification on things I had read just recently on the internet, from a woman representing the ISC," said Levinia Wright, whose brother lives near Silver City. "This reinforced my initial understanding that there are a lot of requirements, and that is all tied up with CAP delivery."

Wright's friend, Edwina Vogan, and several other attendees complained that the open-house-style meeting offered little information.

"I am concerned about water flows and drought conditions, and plan to make some comments," Vogan said. "I also understand that things are still shifting. That is disturbing, since they're on this one-year time limit. That pushes the understanding of the public on this and pushes the actual review of this project by the experts and agencies."

"It's hard to know what to think because there isn't a lot of information," said Sandy Bahr, director of the Grand Canyon Chapter of the Sierra Club. "If you want the public to provide meaningful comment, which is the whole point of the scoping in NEPA, give us enough to make meaningful comment."

The Daily Press asked for comment from each of the 10 or so non-agency Arizona residents who attended Friday's meeting. Several refrained from commenting because they were just learning about it. Others said the reason for low attendance was clear.

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Partly Cloudy and 80°F
County Airport, NM
Winds are from the S at 13.8 gusting to 21.9 mph (13.8 to 19 KT). The humidity index is 81. Last updated: July 8 2018, 11:55 am MD



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“If you really want the public to not come, have it on a Friday night after a holiday,” Bahr said.

“Now, July 6, two days after the holiday, when no one is in town, they have this at a casino,” Wright said.

“The timing could have been better. There is a whole lot more education that needs to happen.”

CAP Entity Executive Director Anthony Gutierrez, on hand to answer the public’s questions, said he had heard some place-specific questions from residents.

“I have had some questions about water flows when [the Gila] crosses the state line, things like that,” he said.

Two attendees gave more detailed information.

Derek Eysenbach, planning and environmental specialist for the Bureau of Land Management in Arizona, said his district has recently turned their eyes to the project with interest.

“Through the years, it’s come up from time to time,” he said. “Some of the guys who’ve been here a long time will say, ‘Oh yeah, that’s been going on for forever.’ People are just kind of getting to know about it now. We’ve heard, from time to time, but details are always kind of sketchy. As this gets moving now, we’ll get more involved.”

He said that probably his biggest concern, at this first look, is any possible effects a diversion of the Gila River could have on the National Riparian Conservation Area on the river downstream in Arizona.

“There are only three [NRCAs] in the nation, and the Gila is one of them, between Morenci and Safford,” Eysenbach said. “People float it, fish it, bird-watchers come. There are a lot of people who go there. It’s really the jewel of southeast Arizona public lands down there.”

He said grazers will probably not be affected much, but some private landowners along the river may get involved, once they hear more about it.

“Our interest is as a cooperating agency,” Eysenbach said. “We have data that may be useful – streamflow, recreation data, fisheries specialists and all that. We just want to make sure they have all the information.”

Maricopa County resident David Palty shared an idea for powering the pumping station components of the New Mexico Unit plan.

“I think there’s an opportunity to do more,” he said. “What came to me initially was floating solar panels on top of the storage ponds, especially the lined ones, where you have some level assurance. That helps stave off some of the evaporation issues. And, the draws are pretty small on the pumping stations.”

Bahr said, before leaving, that she thought the whole project seemed outdated.

“This project seems like something that would have been proposed in the ‘60s or ‘70s,” she said. “Now we have climate change and less water. The Gila is already pretty taxed. There are a lot of things to be concerned about, but not enough information available to have a good understanding.”

Notable absences Friday were representatives of the nearby Gila River Indian Community, signatories of the AWSA in 2004, whom the N.M. CAP Entity must pay for water to be delivered equal to every drop they divert through the New Mexico Unit diversion project – if it is ever built.

NEPA scoping meetings continue today at the Apache Gold Casino in San Carlos from 1 to 4 p.m., and next week:

- July 9, at the Grant County Veterans Memorial Business and Conference Center, Multipurpose Room, 3031 U.S. 180 E., Silver City;
- July 10, at Cliff High School, Old Gymnasium, 622 N.M. 211, Cliff;

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- July 11, at the Glenwood Community Center and Library, 14 Menges Lane, Glenwood;
- July 12, at the Virden Community Center, 110 Richmond Ave., Virden; and
- July 13, at the Graham County General Services Building, 921 Thatcher Blvd., Safford, Ariz.

All meetings other than today's will be held from 4 to 7 p.m.

—Benjamin Fisher



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