

Feds to replace Rio Grande water after agencies cut back

By John Fleck / Journal Staff Writer on Fri, Sep 2, 2011



Reduced use of Rio Grande water by central New Mexico's two largest water agencies means the federal government will have to take up the slack to keep the Rio Grande wet in coming months.

As I reported in [this morning's paper](#), the Middle Rio Grande Conservancy District and the Albuquerque Bernalillo County Water Utility Authority are cutting back, spurred by drought and ash from the upstream fire zones:

Drought and forest fire ash are forcing central New Mexico's two largest water agencies to reduce the amount of water they take from the Rio Grande over the next few months.

The Albuquerque Bernalillo County Water Utility Authority on Thursday stopped pumping drinking water from the Rio Grande. And the Middle Rio Grande Conservancy District announced Thursday it would stop releasing water stored in northern New Mexico reservoirs in mid-September. That means the only water available to divert into farm irrigation ditches will be whatever flows naturally in the river.

That water should be enough to meet farmers' needs as the irrigation season winds down, and will allow the conservancy district to save water for next year as a hedge against another year of drought, officials said Thursday.

For the municipal water authority, cleaning ash from the Las Conchas Fire has been expensive, driving up the cost of treating Rio Grande water for delivery to Albuquerque metro area homes and businesses, said John Stomp, the utility's chief operating officer.

Down in the weeds of Rio Grande water management is an intriguing knock-on effect. By releasing stored water for their own needs, the two agencies also helped keep the river channel wet for the endangered Rio Grande silvery minnow. Without that water to rely on, the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation will have to release water currently in storage to meet legally mandated flow targets for the minnow, according to spokeswoman Mary Perea Carlson.

Carlson told me this week that the agency's current estimates suggest 20,000 to 30,000 acre feet of stored water will be needed to make up the shortfall in coming months.

