



NEWS RELEASE

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Dry Conditions in the Middle Rio Grande Valley Continue Requiring Irrigation Cutbacks to Area Farmers

Albuquerque, NM - The Middle Rio Grande Conservancy District (District) is issuing notice to area farmers that the agency will be running out of storage reserves that serve 60,000 acres of irrigated agriculture within the middle Rio Grande valley. The District will be serving the Prior and Paramount (P&P) water rights for 8,847 acres of land within the six middle Rio Grande Pueblos first, as required by the 1928 Act of the United States Congress to protect Pueblo water rights. All other remaining water will be distributed as available to other farmers and lands. Farmers using the District water bank will continue to be curtailed until there is sufficient water beyond what is needed to meet demands for all other lands within the District through the remaining irrigation season that ends October 31, 2018.

Although rains have helped to extend the irrigation season, high temperatures coupled with spotty rain events has required the use of the District's final block of 15,000 acre-feet of San Juan-Chama Project water residing behind Heron, El Vado and Abiquiu reservoirs in northern New Mexico. The year began with a record-low spring runoff. Fortunately, the District had reserved in excess of 130,000 acre-feet of water to supplement the natural flows of the Rio Chama, and Rio Grande entering the valley at Cochiti Dam. Under normal conditions, reservoir storage supplements flow in the Rio Grande for periods in summer and early fall. In 2018, flows have been so low that the District has been releasing water from storage continuously since April. For over 3 months, most water entering the Middle Rio Grande valley has been from reservoir storage maintaining flows throughout much of the middle Rio Grande. Had it not been for the judicious use of water last year resulting in water saved for this year, the Rio Grande would have dried from well north of Albuquerque all the way to Elephant Butte.

Predicting the moment the last drop leaves the reservoir is not possible, however it is expected late next week. It will take a number of days to see the results, depending upon where lands are within the 150-mile system. The District's ability to deliver irrigation water will then be dependent on whatever water is flowing naturally. Flows will depend on rains and what water use is occurring upstream of the middle Rio Grande. The end of storage releases does not mean the end of irrigation deliveries. There will be water in some areas and in other areas at other times. However, the District will have no ability to regulate flow to meet scheduled demand, and cannot guarantee that water will be available when scheduled.

“The District and its irrigators have done well with the available supply up to this point in a very challenging year” says David Gensler, Manager of Water Operations for the District. “Running out of stored water isn't the end of irrigation season. We've been in this position in the past, and everyone pulls together to make the most of whatever natural flow is available.”

The District's Irrigation System Operators (ISOs) will remain in contact with irrigators, and will advise when water is available. Notice may be short and the District will do all it can to distribute water to as many users as possible and will operate canals to take full advantage of rain inflow when it occurs. ISOs will advise irrigators when irrigation is curtailed to non-Pueblo users to allow delivery to P&P lands.

“The District shares in the concern that this may create hardship for irrigators throughout the District and we will work diligently during these conditions to distribute water fairly, and minimize that hardship to the greatest extent possible” says Glen Duggins, Chairman of the Board of Directors.

Water releases above irrigation flows may continue to be made by the Bureau of Reclamation and the Albuquerque Bernalillo County Water Utility Authority (ABCWUA). These releases will support river flow for endangered species and diversion for ABCWUA municipal water delivery using San Juan-Chama Project water they own. The District will work closely with Reclamation and ABCWUA to maximize water available for our water users while assuring that the water released by them reaches these intended purposes.

About the MRGCD: The Middle Rio Grande Conservancy District has been promoting sustainable agriculture for the past 85 years. The District delivers water to about 60,000 acres of cropland in the Middle Rio Grande Valley. That water is reused time and time again to irrigate crops, sustains the cottonwood bosque along the Rio Grande, help create and maintain habitat for the endangered Rio Grande silvery minnow and recharges the aquifer. The District owns 30,000 acres of bosque in the valley, the largest continuous cottonwood forest in the world, and a stretch of land that provides unprecedented recreational opportunities and an irreplaceable swath of greenbelt in New Mexico's largest metropolitan area. The District was formed in 1925 to alleviate flooding and to reclaim farmland in the valley. Its boundaries stretch 150 miles from Cochiti Dam to the north to the boundary of the Bosque Del Apache National Wildlife Refuge on the south, running through Sandoval, Bernalillo, Valencia and Socorro Counties. It operates more than 1,200 miles of canals, laterals and drains, which are used to convey water to and from cropland. The District is funded by water service charges and property assessments on the benefited lands within its boundaries.

MRGCD Water 2018 Outlook, 8/10/2018

The 2018 irrigation season has continued to be very challenging. The summer has brought some “monsoon” rain. Unfortunately, the rain has not been as much as we hoped for. We have been releasing water from storage continuously since April. For much of the last 3 months, the only water entering the Middle Rio Grande valley has been artificial, released from reservoirs in the northern part of the State. Naturally occurring flow has often been so low that there would have been no water in the river from Cochiti all the way to Elephant Butte, had it not been for the water stored from previous seasons.

As of yesterday (Thursday, August 9), the MRGCD had just under 21,000 Acre-Feet of water remaining in upstream reservoirs. A small portion of that water will be set aside to maintain deliveries to lands of the Pueblo’s with “prior and paramount” water rights. At the present rate of release, we estimate this remaining water will be fully used in less than 2 weeks. By the last week in August, much less water will be flowing down the river, and diversions to our canals will be affected.

Without reservoir storage to release, the MRGCD will be dependent entirely on natural flow of the Rio Grande. That may be very little, possibly even no water available at times. Or, there may be a lot of water, depending on rains. The current forecast gives hope for above normal precipitation in the late summer/early fall. But until the rain falls, we never know just how much it will be. It is likely to be intermittent, with possibly no water available for extended periods of time. Our field staff (Irrigation System Operators) will remain in touch with irrigators and inform them when water will be available. The notice may be short, as rains can happen unexpectedly and make water available. Our intent will be to make the best use of whatever water is flowing to benefit as many irrigators as possible.

When storage is exhausted, we will be in what is known as “P&P Operations”. Certain lands of the Pueblos, totaling around 8850 acres, were designated long ago by an Act of Congress as having rights senior to all others within the MRGCD. When there is not enough water for all irrigators, we are obligated to meet the normal irrigation needs of these “P&P” lands first, from whatever flow is present. The small storage reserve earlier designated for this purpose may be released as needed. The Pueblos have been very helpful to the MRGCD this year, managing that “P&P” reserve to support regular irrigation as long as possible, for the benefit of all irrigators. Any water remaining after Pueblo irrigation needs have been met will become available for use by other irrigators, including Pueblo lands without the “P&P” right (referred to as “newly reclaimed” or “NR” lands). During “P&P Operations”, the MRGCD works closely with the Pueblos and the Bureau of Indian Affairs to determine Indian irrigation needs, and how much, or how little water is available for other irrigators.

We realize this will create hardship for irrigators throughout the MRGCD. Please stay in close contact with your ISO, and we will do our best to distribute whatever water becomes available as fairly as possible.

For more information, contact the MRGCD at 505-247-0234 or visit our web site at www.mrgcd.com.

Water Bank for Cochiti, Albuquerque and Belen Divisions is curtailed as of July 30. Water Bank for Socorro Division is curtailed as of August 7th. Those that have scheduled irrigation with their ISO will have through Saturday morning to complete their watering.