

San Juan Deal Drains N.M. Dry

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Everyone thinks that the Rio Grande is the lifeblood of New Mexico, but in reality, the San Juan River is the lifeline for New Mexico. It provides 60 percent of the surface water in the state — much more than the Rio Grande, the Pecos and the Gila combined.

From the northwest corner of New Mexico, water from the San Juan flows through tunnels in the San Juan-Chama Project to replenish the Rio Grande.

Albuquerque is finishing a \$275 million project to use San Juan water, while Santa Fe is spending \$145 million. Taos, Española, Los Alamos, San Juan Pueblo and Belen are also counting on water from the San Juan River.

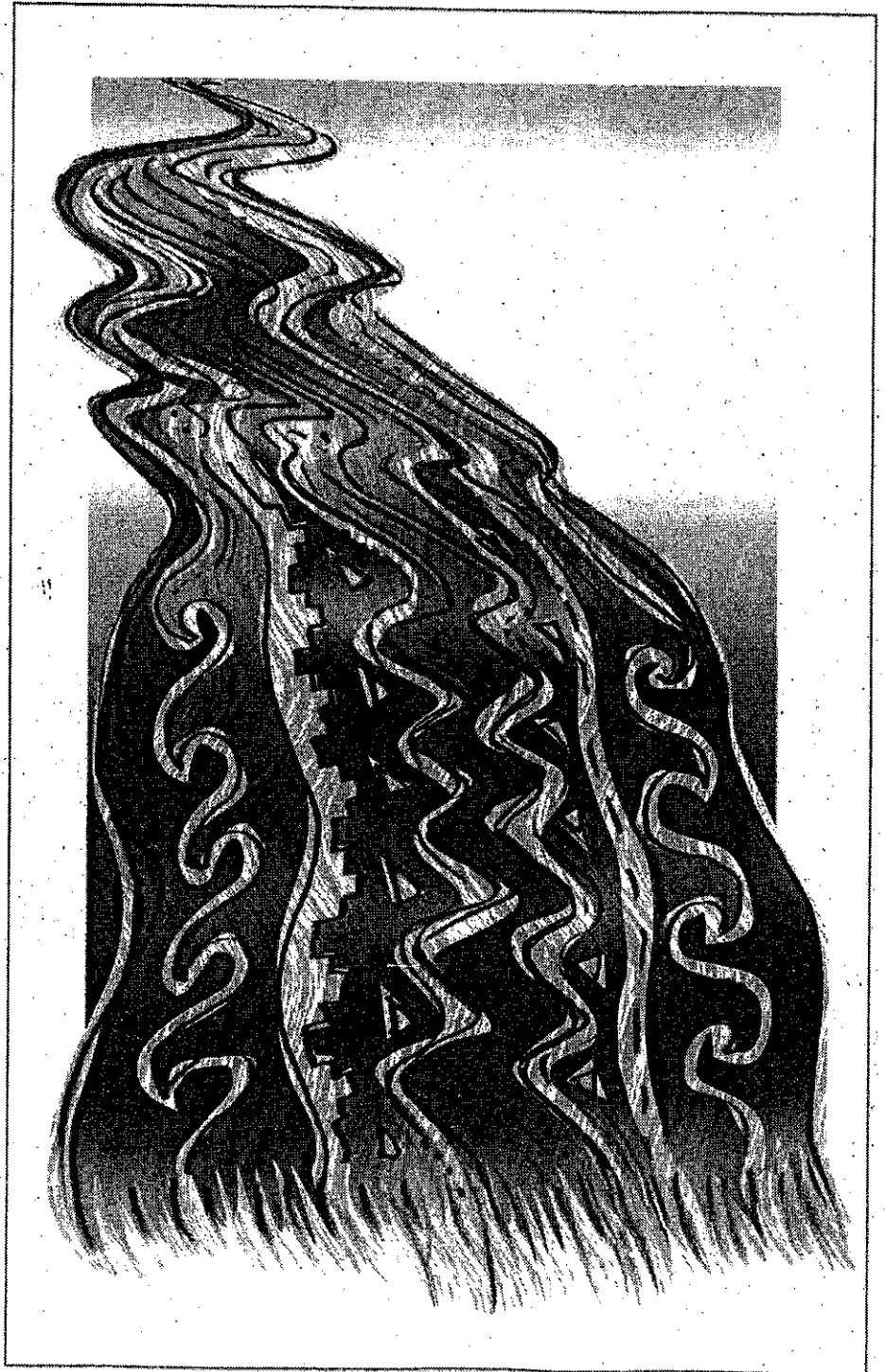
But these communities may be disappointed, because there is a crisis on the San Juan that will soon affect the entire state.

One problem is ecological: there isn't enough water in the San Juan River. The San Juan is the biggest tributary to the Colorado River, which is already overdrawn. When New Mexico signed the Colorado River Compact in 1922, it was assumed that the water flow in the Colorado was 16.4 million acre-feet annually. But in 2007, a report from the National Academy of Sciences indicates the flow may be only 13 million acre-feet and dropping, due to global warming.

The second problem is political. Gov. Bill Richardson is pushing a settlement that would give the Navajo tribe 56 percent of the water in the San Juan River. *This is equal to one-third of all the river water in New Mexico.*

Richardson wants to settle the water claims by the Navajo tribe for the part of the reservation that lies within New Mexico. According to the 2000 census, only 44,636 people live on the Navajo reservation in New Mexico, including both Indians and non-Indians. Yet under Richardson's proposed settlement, they would control one-third of all the water flow in the entire state.

This gigantic water deal is now being studied by Congress. So here is the mega question: If the federal government gives away one-third of New Mexico's water, what happens to the other 1.8 million people who live in this state? The rest of us will be facing an immediate and unsolvable water crisis.



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New Mexico is running short on water, so the rest of the state needs to wake up and pay attention to what is happening on the San Juan River. If the federal government gives away one-third of our water, then New Mexico will remain poor and dry. The water supply to the Rio Grande is already in danger, since the San Juan-Chama Project draws from a very small watershed with fluctuating runoff. If Congress approves this "settlement," there are so many legal and environmental complications that no one can predict what will happen to New Mexico's lifeline.

If the Navajo tribe corners the market on New Mexico water, it is likely the tribe will sell to the highest bidders, which will probably be the downstream states of California and Nevada.

The tribe is also claiming water from Arizona and Utah, so it may be able to control the entire Colorado River system. Meanwhile, the city of Santa Fe is already leasing San Juan water from the Jicarilla tribe for \$500 per acre foot per year, and that price will keep climbing.

The Navajo tribe says the Richardson settlement is a fair compromise, because

the tribe argues it is legally entitled to all the water in the San Juan River under an obscure series of federal court cases (the so-called "Winters Doctrine").

This is not correct, because the Navajo tribe already gets more than its fair share of water, thanks to the Navajo Dam project.

The federal government built Navajo Dam in the 1960s, during the happy days when everybody thought the Colorado River would never run out of water. Navajo Dam supplies huge amounts of water to Navajo Agricultural Products Industry (NAPI), which grows crops with sprinklers on the windy high desert, almost 1,000 feet above the river.

Much of this water is wasted, because NAPI "has been a huge financial failure," according to a 1999 article in The Albuquerque Journal. This "Navajo farm project struggles financially despite millions of dollars in government funding."

Even though NAPI loses money almost every year, the Journal also reported that the Navajo tribe wants to expand this money-losing operation in order to protect its water claims. "When more acreage is farmed, the project uses more water. If the tribe doesn't use the water, it is in danger of losing its right to it."

So Congress needs to fix this situation, instead of making it worse.

Federal law should guarantee a fair share of New Mexico's water to the Navajo tribe, on an equal basis with everyone else in the state. And Congress should change the law so that the Navajo tribe does not have to waste water on NAPI, just to protect its water rights.

Congress needs to allow the tribe to make better use of the water it already has. And Congress also needs to protect all of the other people in New Mexico who are depending on water from the San Juan River.