



'23 must be pivotal year for water policy changes in NM

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As the state office of the National Audubon Society in New Mexico, Audubon Southwest’s mission is to conserve and restore natural ecosystems, focusing on birds, other wildlife and their habitats, for the benefit of humanity and the Earth’s biological diversity.

New Mexico had an unprecedented \$8.5 billion budget to work with during this year’s legislative session. Fiscal 2022 provided the perfect scenario and timing to invest in water programs, and consolidate current data about water and infrastructure. Unfortunately, many water programs in the state did not receive large enough increases in funding, placing us further behind in our efforts to respond to the dire water crisis in New Mexico.

Water is life in New Mexico, and that life is under threat. We are the fourth-driest state in the country and we are getting drier every year. We hear news daily about ongoing drought, difficulty in accessing drinking water in certain communities, litigation between Texas and New Mexico over the Rio Grande Compact, and low water levels at Elephant Butte Reservoir. All these events are indicators that the incredible wildlife that thrives in New Mexico, our beautiful landscapes, and our traditional communities and agricultural practices are in trouble. The fate of future generations is tied directly to how the state adapts its water resources management today.

New Mexico needs to update its water infrastructure and management, fully fund water programs, and plan for persistent drought by reducing use and ensuring the rivers are flowing. Banking water for future shortages is also a critical need – and underfunded. Eighty percent of our at-risk species are dependent directly on land near rivers and streams, and the governor has committed to protecting biodiversity and preserving sensitive ecosystems. This is a step in the right direction, but we need to do more.

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Voters clearly support measures to address water issues in a meaningful way. As shown by a recent survey released by the Thornburg and Water foundations, 75% of New Mexican voters want actions now to ensure future generations continue to have an adequate water supply. The survey also shows 74% of voters support investing more in water infrastructure, 68% support using the Outstanding Natural Resource Waters program that grants state protection to certain special waters, and 84% support updating water data while making it publicly available.

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We missed a golden opportunity this legislative session to make significant gains in addressing the water crisis, but it’s not too late. We know we need to act now and the public supports it, so let’s do it. The Legislature, the Governor’s Office and advocacy groups must start preparing for the 2023 60-day session. It will provide another opportunity to give state agencies innovative policy tools and the funding to implement them. We must work together to meet 21st-century water use, protection and storage challenges. Audubon Southwest will work to support legislation to fund water programs fully, prepare for prolonged drought and modernize the state’s water management. For the good of our economy, environment and public health, we must get ready for the water challenges ahead. If we are to have a future, we have to act today.

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