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Gila River



PHOTO: WICK BEAVERS

GILA RIVER, NEW MEXICO

State: New Mexico

Threat: Water diversion

At Risk: New Mexico's last free-flowing river and water security for southwest New Mexico

Summary

The Gila River is New Mexico's last major free-flowing river and one of the few remaining wild rivers in the Colorado River Basin. The river's health is threatened by a new diversion project that could suck the river dry. Local municipalities and districts are proposing to spend federal funds to divert the Gila River to benefit a small number of farms and a mining company rather than spending the money on cost-effective, sustainable community water projects that meet the needs of southwest New Mexico. Governor Lujan Grisham must permanently stop the diversion project and advance more cost-effective, innovative water supply solutions.

The River

Flowing out of the nation's first Wilderness Area, the Gila River supports outstanding examples of southwestern riparian forest, cold-water fisheries and a remarkable abundance of wildlife. Its cottonwood gallery forests are high-value bird habitat supporting one of the highest concentrations of breeding birds in America, including the federally-endangered southwestern willow flycatcher and federally-threatened yellow billed cuckoo. The Gila River also supports one of the most intact native fish communities in the Lower Colorado River Basin including the federally-endangered loach minnow, spike dace and federally-threatened Gila trout, as well as a naturally reproducing sport fishery. Federally-endangered northern Mexican garter snake, narrow headed garter snake and Chiricahua leopard frog also live in the area. As a result, the Gila River provides significant economic value to the region with superb opportunities for outdoor recreation, nature-based specialty travel and wilderness experience.

The Gila River is important to indigenous peoples who have lived in southwestern New Mexico for thousands of years. Many cultural sites are found along the Gila River and throughout its watershed. Furthermore, the Hispanic community has a culture, heritage and way-of-life tied to the river and forest, where generations continue to hunt, fish, hike and enjoy family time together.

The Threat

The Gila River is threatened by a diversion that could dry up New Mexico's last wild river and impact the local outdoor recreation and tourism economy dependent upon a healthy river. The diversions and infrastructure would harm critical habitat for seven threatened or endangered species. Declining groundwater levels caused by the diversion and new groundwater pumping could threaten the health of the cottonwood-sycamore-willow bosque, some of the last remaining intact riparian forest in the Lower Colorado River Basin. The diversion dams would also limit recreational opportunities, like river running, and potentially impact irrigators.

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GILA RIVER, NEW MEXICO

In 2004, Congress passed the Arizona Water Settlements Act (AWSA) that authorized diversion of the Gila River if New Mexico agreed to pay for delivery of Central Arizona Project (CAP) water to downstream users in Arizona to replace what is taken out of the river in New Mexico. There is a collective group of counties, municipalities, irrigation districts and soil and water conservation districts called the New Mexico CAP Entity. The CAP Entity proposes to spend federal funds from the AWSA to divert the Gila River to benefit a small group of farmers and the mining giant Freeport-McMoRan. The proposal includes infrastructure for future

expansion of up to about 14,000 acre-feet, or approximately 4.6 billion gallons per year of water.

Scientists estimate that due to climate change, the Gila River will cease to be a snowpack-fed river by mid-century. The proposed a diversion project would put greater strain on Gila River flows already altered and reduced by the impacts of climate change. In turn, climate change likely will limit the amount and availability of water that can be developed by the proposed diversion, calling into question the project's long-term viability. Use of the federal AWSA funds on a questionable diversion project is folly, especially when these dollars can be spent on cost-effective priority water projects that would build long-term water security and resiliency.

Currently, \$66 million from the AWSA is available to meet local water needs. These community water projects, such as the Grant County Regional Water Supply Project, would secure the long-term water supply for the 60,000 people of southwest New Mexico.

What Must Be Done

After more than a decade of planning and more than \$15 million spent, the diversion project is in the last year of review under the National Environmental Policy Act. A draft Environmental Impact Statement is expected in April 2019 with a Record of Decision by the end of 2019. Despite the projected high costs, severe delays in schedule and feasibility issues with multiple iterations of the diversion proposal, this project continues to move forward with likely support from the Trump administration.

In this critical year, New Mexico Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham can eliminate the threat to the Gila River by withdrawing the project from the AWSA process and instead spending available AWSA funding on non-diversion projects to meet the water needs of communities throughout southwest New Mexico. Governor Lujan Grisham has pledged to end work on the diversion by using these funds more efficiently on other projects and ensure that the Gila River is protected by federal law. She must fulfill this promise. This would save taxpayers and water users' money, provide direct benefits for area farmers and businesses and protect the Gila River for future generations.