



MY VIEW DANIEL TIMMONS

Low Flow Conveyance Channel — an idea that won't die

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Like zombies, some ideas just won't die. This is true in Western water as much as anywhere. While there are many smart folks studying — and implementing — creative ways to conserve water, restore rivers and support sustainable agriculture, others are looking backward for inspiration.

Here in New Mexico, the Low Flow Conveyance Channel is one such zombie idea again rising from the grave, as recently detailed in the article (“Diverting the Rio Grande could cut N.M.’s water debt,” April 17).

The Low Flow is a 1950s-era ditch designed to bypass more than 50 miles of the natural river channel from San Acacia (north of Socorro) down to Elephant Butte Reservoir. Throughout the 1960s and '70s, most of the river's flow was diverted into the Low Flow, leaving the Rio Grande high and dry, and dramatically transforming the river's ecology, floodplain, and the valley as a whole.

By the mid-1980s, however, sediment buildup in the Low Flow forced water managers to stop such diversions. After its abandonment, the Rio Grande once again flowed, creating and preserving one of the most diverse wildlife habitat corridors in New Mexico, home to more than 400 bird species, including several imperiled ones. While the river still dries up in stretches during the summer, it remains a biodiversity hot spot

— including one of New Mexico’s crown jewels, Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge.

As climate change reduces flows in the Rio Grande, it is clear that business-as-usual water management is not going to cut it. But looking back to outdated 1950s engineering ideas to solve 21st century problems is not the direction we should be heading.

Unfortunately, that appears to be where the Middle Rio Grande Conservancy District and the Interstate Stream Commission want to take us, based on recently unveiled plans to restart diversions into the Low Flow to improve compact deliveries. But our understanding of the importance of a living river has evolved in recent decades, and further drying of the river is no longer acceptable.

The costs and benefits of using the Low Flow also bear close examination: We need to ask how much water will actually be delivered and at what cost. Could the district better use those dollars to conserve water and improve efficiency in its 1,200 miles of existing canals and drains, or across the tens of thousands of acres of farmlands it serves? Across the West, the effects of a warming and drying climate are requiring states to reduce their use of water.

With most Western water still going to irrigated agriculture, it should surprise no one to find thirsty, low-value crops like alfalfa in the crosshairs. Solving our water crisis simply cannot be done without making meaningful progress to reduce agricultural water demand to sustainable levels, likely through some combination of more efficient deliveries, changes in cropping patterns and selective land repurposing.

Given the magnitude of the challenges ahead, we cannot simply engineer our way out of this problem. Instead, we need to explore the more fruitful question of what we want for the Rio Grande, as well as the farms and communities along its banks. We need forward-looking, long-term, holistic solutions that will work in the coming decades, not old-school ideas seeking to boost water deliveries by shortchanging the river. We must adapt to a changing hydrologic reality understanding that there will be less water in the system in the future, period.

As the district and the Interstate Stream Commission roll out their vision for a resurrected Low Flow Conveyance Channel, we hope the public will weigh in and support restoration of a living Rio Grande, not putting the river back into a ditch. It's also important to tell our elected officials that we need long-term solutions to our changing water future to support clean water, healthy flows and resilient communities.

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