

Their View: Valley safety threatened by wilderness area proposals

By Gary Esslinger / For the Sun-News Las Cruces Sun-News

Posted:

scsun-news.com

Elephant Butte Irrigation District (EBID) represents over 8,000 members and delivers surface water to over 90,000 acres of agricultural land in the Rincon and Mesilla Valleys. On June 22nd, 2012, EBID passed a resolution opposing the Organ Mountain-Desert Peaks National Monument proposal, put forward by the Wilderness Alliance, and the Organ Mountains Dona Ana County Conservation and Protection Act (SB1024), proposed by Senator Bingaman. The proposals jeopardize the ability of regional entities with watershed and stormwater management responsibilities to manage the watersheds.

EBID is very much in favor of preservation of local wilderness areas for the benefit and enjoyment of the entire community. In fact, the District enthusiastically supports actions to restore the upper reaches of the El Paso-Las Cruces watershed, which is the area that drains from both sides of the valley into the Rio Grande. However, these proposals would close designated wilderness areas to timely access and the development of best management practices and infrastructure to protect the river valley from problems associated with degraded watersheds.

Here are four good reasons you should be concerned about stormwater management:

1. More than 100 flood control dams on both sides of the river are aging and need rehabilitation. Failure to restore and replace these dams, which are maintained by various governmental entities and private owners, leaves the valley vulnerable to flooding. In addition, there are numerous "wild" arroyos which currently have no flood prevention in place. Recall the floods that devastated Hatch, El Paso, and Juarez in 2006. Many of the dams are filling up with silt, while the "wild" arroyos drop a heavy silt and debris load into the river. Floods threaten not only farmers, but everyone who lives in the Rio Grande valley. Regional climate models indicate that the area is headed into a period where climate is drier overall, but is paradoxically subject to more extreme rainfall events.
2. The El Paso-Las Cruces watershed regularly exceeds water quality standards for the bacteria E. coli, which poses public health hazards. One of the major contributing factors to E. coli in the Rio Grande is stormwater runoff. The Paso del Norte Watershed Council is developing a plan to reduce E. coli in the river. Effort will be required to intercept contaminated water upstream of EBID's conveyance system and the river. Even though EBID's primary charge is delivering water to irrigators, its conveyance system is the primary recipient of contaminated runoff received from the "wild" arroyos and flood control dams. With appropriate changes, the conveyance system can help reduce contamination before it reaches the river.
3. The watershed, like many watersheds throughout New Mexico, is impaired. Past management practices have led to loss of ground cover, plant and animal habitat, and serious erosion. About half of the area currently proposed for the Organ Mountain-Desert Peaks National Monument belongs to this significantly impaired watershed. This is the area where restoration work must take place including "green" measures such as ponding areas, ground cover, and earthen berms, to reduce sediment loads, contaminants, and peak flood flows.
4. Stormwater represents an untapped source of surface water which is desperately needed in this dry region during a period of declining water supply. Harnessing this source is vital to recharging the aquifers and improving water quality. Thanks to the 2008 operating agreement among the United States and the Texas and New Mexico irrigation districts, EBID has the right to capture the stormwater for use within the boundaries of EBID. This water can either be used directly for irrigation, infiltrated to recharge the aquifers, or controlled to meet downstream delivery obligations to Texas and Mexico, allowing EBID to use more water from storage in Elephant Butte and Caballo Reservoirs.

Although SB1024 stipulates that a management plan be developed within three years of passage of the legislation, it does not provide for new construction in the interest of flood control, watershed restoration, and water conservation. Experience with other BLM-managed plans shows that there is no certainty the agency will allow timely access, construction, and restoration work.

Curiously, the Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks National Monument proposal has not been made available for public

review, so it is not possible to evaluate its provisions. The map that has been released shows about 85 percent of the county is slated to be designated as wilderness. Without specific language guaranteeing timely access and the ability to build roads and structures to implement watershed management plans and flood control structures within the proposed area, it will be impossible to implement needed restoration and protection measures. It is absolutely necessary to get the specifics of a management plan developed, with specific conditions laid out clearly, before any wilderness designation. Trying to protect access to be able to restore these watersheds after designation, when all local control is lost, is a fool's errand. The process is backward, and it will insure that our impaired watersheds stay impaired permanently.

It is in the public's interest to ensure adequate flood control, reduction of pathogens, and watershed restoration. EBID's interests are closely aligned with those who want to restore the watershed. But as things currently stand, the District cannot support either proposal because they do not provide for needed work to restore the watershed, increase the water supply, and protect the community.

Gary Esslinger is treasurer-manager of the Elephant Butte Irrigation District.