

The Gila River Diversion

Briefing Paper

A Wild and Scenic River

In 1982, the National Park Service (NPS) did a study of all of the rivers in the United States and found that all 255 miles of the New Mexico portion of the 649-mile-long Gila River qualified for National Wild and Scenic Rivers designation.

More recently, New Mexico Wilderness Alliance Gila Grassroots Organizer Nathan Newcomer has hiked 70 miles of the Gila River, and said he believes the entire river qualifies for a National Wild and Scenic Rivers designation.

Only Congress or the Secretary of the Interior can designate a river as wild and scenic, but the National Forest Service can make recommendations in their land management plan revision process. Once designated as wild and scenic, portions of the river would be managed by the agency that manages the land the river runs through.

During the 1982 Nationwide River Inventory, the NPS used “Outstanding Remarkable Values” as an indicator for possible designation of a river:

- Scenery
- Recreation
- Geology
- Fish and wildlife
- Historic
- Cultural
- Other similar values

During the process, the Gila River was show to include these characteristics. According to the NPS, “The river varies from the pristine setting in the Wilderness and National Forest to a broad sandy floodplain traversing low, rolling terrain. In NM, the river valley is important as habitat for a variety of state listed endangered species, but is unique because of the tremendous diversity of wildlife species found in the area. Richest avifauna of any riparian system in NM. The river flows through a highly scenic gorge of unspoiled beauty in the Gila Box in AZ.”

Arizona Water Settlements Act

One of the other deciding characteristics for a wild and scenic river is that it is “free-flowing” or undammed. Currently, the Gila River is the last remaining free-flowing river in the state of New Mexico, but that could change, threatening its quality as a wild and scenic river.

In 2004, Congress passed the Arizona Water Settlements Act (AWSA). Through AWSA, Congress would give \$100 million to New Mexico for “water conservation projects.” It authorized the diversion of the Gila River if New Mexico agreed to buy water from Arizona to replace what the state takes out of the river.

Now that the New Mexico Interstate Stream Commission (ISC) has approved a proposal to divert the Gila River, it goes to Secretary of the Interior Sally Jewell to sign. If signed by Jewell, a federal National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process would start.

According to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), NEPA “requires federal agencies to integrate environmental values into their decision making processes by considering the environmental impacts of their proposed actions and reasonable alternatives to those actions.”

As part of this process, federal agencies must prepare an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), which the EPA reviews.

If the proposal makes it this far, Newcomer believes it can be defeated. “There are a lot of things wrong with it,” he said. For instance, one of several proposed reservoir sites is located within a Bureau of Land Management Wilderness Study Area, which is illegal—this is just one of many similar examples. On the other hand, designating the Gila River as wild and scenic would protect the river from current and future efforts to divert it.

A Better Alternative

According to a letter dated September 18, 2014, from former ISC Board Chair Norm Gaume, a Gila River diversion would cost more than \$1.1 billion for New Mexico taxpayers.

However, \$66 million is available from AWSA to meet community water needs in southwest New Mexico without diverting the Gila River.

Furthermore, according to the Gila Conservation Coalition, non-diversion alternatives can secure New Mexico’s water future without building a costly diversion project that will alter the Gila River forever.

These alternatives include:

- Municipal water conservation: reduces demand for water
- Agricultural water conservation: reduces agricultural consumption through water efficient technologies
- Effluent reuse: conserves water by applying treated effluent to irrigate public facilities, such as athletic fields, and golf courses
- Sustainable groundwater management: balances groundwater use with groundwater recharge
- Watershed restoration: focuses on health of watershed to protect and improve water quality

A Gila River diversion is costly and unnecessary and would harm the Gila River’s qualification to join the National Wild and Scenic River system. Less costly, common-sense, environmentally-friendly options should be instead considered to meet the water demands of southwest New Mexico. Designation as a National Wild and Scenic River is also a preferred alternative to damming the river.