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Community



Water group reviews basin priorities

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Sustainability tops list

By RUTH HEIDE

ALAMOSA — Nobody knows “everything there is to know about San Luis Valley water,” but one of the goals of the Rio Grande Inter Basin Roundtable is to gather and disseminate as much information as possible.

Through a survey conducted by The Colorado Foundation for Water Education, whose primary role is education, the roundtable members revealed the areas they believed the group has been successful, areas they believe they require more information and areas of future emphasis.

Of those responding to the foundation’s survey, Rio Grande Roundtable members said they believed their top priorities as a water group should be: to promote sustainable water use; promote statewide vision and solutions; identify projects and processes to meet future consumptive and non-consumptive needs; educate; influence water policy; and protect the basin’s water.

The priorities statewide ran a little differently with identifying projects and processes to meet future needs as the number one priority and influencing water policy as the last priority. Education came in fourth statewide as a priority. Second was promoting statewide vision and solutions and third was promoting sustainable water use.

Kristin Maharg from The Colorado Foundation for Water Education met with the Rio Grande Roundtable on Tuesday to discuss the survey results.

She said the Rio Grande Basin identified its top water issues in 2007 as: Rio Grande Compact (effects of prolonged drought and achieving sustainability); agricultural water needs (ag groundwater use currently at unsustainable levels); economic impacts of reduced groundwater irrigation (minimizing those impacts); residential growth (in some areas of Valley such as South Fork the growth was creating a need for augmentation of water supplies); and municipal/industrial/ag water needs.

Of those priorities, Rio Grande Roundtable members and participants ranked the issues

issues as the top priorities for water education for the roundtable as a whole with the Rio Grande Compact coming in next.

The survey participants also ranked their knowledge on 20 general water concepts from water law to climate variability.

Reflecting the vast knowledge among roundtable participants, the respondents from the Rio Grande Roundtable rated their knowledge of many water issues as more than adequate. These issues included water rights, water law, river restoration practices, surface water hydrology, groundwater hydrology, relationship between land use planning and water supply, Colorado's future water needs, Colorado water administration, climate variability/change, projects/methods to meet the basin's water needs and agricultural water conservation.

Respondents said they had basic but not adequate knowledge of other water issues: how to access funding for water-related projects, interstate compacts, non-consumptive needs assessments, Colorado's in-stream flow program, drought planning, municipal and industrial water conservation and Colorado water quality regulation.

Roundtable member Paul Robertson said one of the weaknesses he saw was a water manual of sorts that would provide basic information about San Luis Valley water issues. He said he has been in the Valley six years and is trying to learn all he can but estimated he still only knows 60 percent of the water facts.

"I think a lot of people would flunk San Luis Valley water," he said.

Roundtable member Steve Vandiver said the most comprehensive document already available is the collection of water publications from The Foundation for Water Education. He suggested that the roundtable obtain a few sets of the foundation's publications to help educate new members.

Roundtable Chairman Mike Gibson said it might not be a bad idea to revisit some of the educational topics the group has had in the past such as the Rio Grande Compact because the roundtable has several relatively new members.

Water educator Judy Lopez said one of the reasons the roundtable is comprised of such diverse members is so those members can share their wealth of knowledge with each other.

"You can't get better than the people in this room," she said.

She added one document could not contain all the water information available for this basin.

As far as how roundtable participants receive information, the majority of survey respondents said they keep informed through roundtable meetings and presentations as well as reports from Interbasin Compact Committee representatives. They said they also use fact sheets, tours, email and websites to gain information.

As far as how the roundtable disseminates information to the public, the answers from the Rio Grande Roundtable included: public presentations; public comment at meetings; newspaper articles; distribution of electronic information; and distribution of hard copy information. The survey respondents said they believed the roundtable had been moderately or sufficiently effective in promoting public participation.

Roundtable member Ralph Curtis said people do not seem to be interested unless there is a crisis. He said, for example, when American Water Development Inc. posed a threat, water meetings drew 200 people.

Maharg said it is also important to make sure people are informed before the crisis occurs.

Ron Brink said people who are involved and informed are less likely to panic in a crisis.

In rating what aspects of the roundtable have worked best, the Rio Grande Roundtable participants said their grant proposals were some of the greatest successes.

"This group had projects and went after the money," said roundtable member Travis Smith. "We learned how to access available funding."

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requests for \$2.4-2.8 million in available funding so the competition will be stiff.

The group also believed the common understanding and relationships among members was a highlight of this roundtable as well as open discussion and stakeholder representation. Statewide, roundtable groups also believed open discussion and building common understanding/relationships were aspects of the roundtable process that worked well.

Rio Grande Roundtable participants said the roundtable process could be improved here by moving towards solutions and through education/information programs and presentations. Ensuring future funding was a high priority statewide.

Maharg said the foundation will present survey results to the Interbasin Compact Committee next week and will have the final package in October.

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