

Santa Fe River flows will not come up after all

City unable to build consensus with downstream stakeholders

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City of Santa Fe Water plans for several days of increased flows in the Santa Fe River have been cancelled. The releases, which had been planned to fulfill an obligation under the Rio Grande Compact will be made from El Vado Reservoir into the Rio Chama instead.

The Rio Grande Compact (Compact) which governs sharing of Rio Grande Water between Colorado, New Mexico, and Texas was signed by the 3 states in 1938. After that agreement went into effect, City of Santa Fe Water expanded reservoir storage in the Santa Fe River. Because this expansion occurred after the Compact was signed, and because the Santa Fe River is a tributary to the Rio Grande, this storage space is governed by certain provisions in the Compact. New Mexico currently owes water to Texas, and as a result, before City of Santa Fe could use any newer reservoir space for itself, a certain amount of “debit” water had to be stored for potential release downstream during non-irrigation season.

“We haven’t been asked to store debit water since 1977, so this was a new thing to us” said City of Santa Fe Water Director Jesse Roach. “We have the option to release the debit water from stored water we have in reservoirs on the Chama, or release it into the Santa Fe River. We saw release of a portion of the debit water into the Santa Fe River as an opportunity to provide aesthetic and hydrologic benefits to our river system during a dry time and also learn about how much of that release would make it to the Rio Grande. However, several downstream communities expressed concerns including potential flooding, sacred sites, and water quality. For this release to be successful we needed to work through those concerns and develop a collaborative monitoring plan, and we ran out of time. I think there is potential benefit to the system of a relatively large winter release, and we will revisit these conversations the next time we store debit water.”

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