



PUBLIC OPINION STRATEGIES

TO: Interested Parties

FROM: Lori Weigel
Public Opinion Strategies

RE: Survey of New Mexico Voters Finds Concern about Rivers and Opposition to Gila River Diversion Project

DATE: July 20, 2013

Public Opinion Strategies recently completed a survey of voters throughout New Mexico regarding their perceptions of water and rivers in New Mexico.¹ Voters register significant concern about the level of water in rivers and river health – with both eclipsing economic concerns.

When asked how to address the issue of water, New Mexicans are clear: they prefer exhausting other alternatives before turning to river diversions. More specifically, the concept of diverting river water from the Gila River to farms and communities receives a mixed, at best, response from voters – even those likely to benefit in Southwestern New Mexico. After a brief, neutral explanation of why diversion is being considered and what it would entail, even that fairly tepid level of support quickly diminishes. A majority of almost all key sub-groups ends up opposing the Gila River diversion project. They perceive it as a short-term fix to a long-term problem; are not willing to pay higher taxes in order to facilitate construction of the project; and believe that the project would have a negative impact on the state budget, their own pocketbook, wildlife, quality of life, and the health of the River.

The survey indicates that opposition to the diversion is grounded in widely-held views that rivers are critical to quality of life in the state.

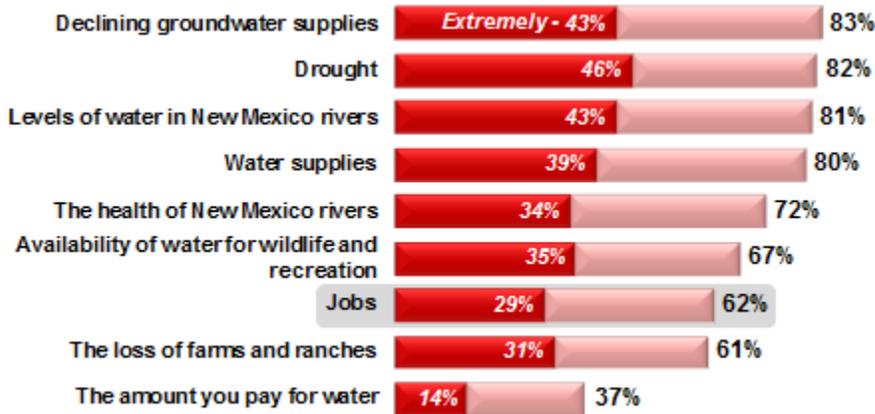
More specifically, the survey found that...

- ❑ **New Mexico voters are gravely concerned about the health of rivers and overall water issues – far outpacing economic concerns at this time.** There are not many places in the country where any issue outpaces economic concerns, so the fact that numerous aspects of the water issue rate as more concerning than the job situation for state residents is striking, as the following

¹ **Methodology:** Public Opinion Strategies conducted a telephone survey of N=500 voters statewide throughout New Mexico, with additional interviews conducted in five counties in Southwestern New Mexico in order to increase statistical confidence in the data for that region (a total of 138 interviews in that region). Interviews were weighted back to reflect their true geographic proportion statewide. The survey was conducted June 20-26, 2013, and has an overall margin of error of +4.0%. Sampling error for subgroups within the sample will be larger. The sample is demographically representative of the electorate. Interviews were conducted both on traditional land lines and cell phones. The survey was preceded by focus groups of voters in Albuquerque on June 10, 2013.

graph illustrates:

Proportion of State Voters Indicating they are Extremely or Very Concerned About That Issue



Moreover, nine-in-ten residents statewide and in the Southwestern counties say that rivers are “at risk” at this time.

- Most New Mexicans ascribe numerous positive attributes to rivers, saying they are critical to the state’s quality of life and something they want to see protected for future generations.** When asked how well a number of different attributes describe “rivers in New Mexico” nearly all residents believe these positive characteristics apply either “very well” or at least “somewhat well” as depicted here:

	Statewide	
	% Very Well	% Total Well
Critical to New Mexico’s quality of life	74%	91%
State treasures that should be protected for future generations	67%	89%
Important to me personally	61%	88%
Critical to New Mexico’s outdoor recreation opportunities	58%	86%
Critical to the New Mexico economy	61%	85%

❑ **New Mexicans reject the concept of river diversions in favor of other approaches.** When asked which approach they would prefer state decision-makers take when it comes to addressing the state’s water situation, the response is overwhelmingly in support of alternatives to diversions:

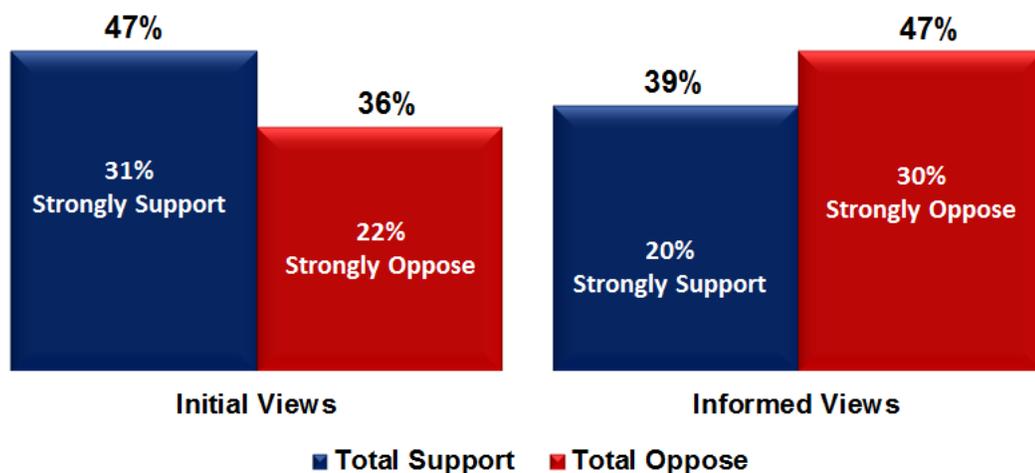
85% Using our current water supply more wisely, by continuing to conserve water, using new technology to help reduce wasted water, and increasing recycling of water
or

12% Diverting more water from New Mexico’s rivers to communities where more people live

❑ **The more state voters hear about the specific Gila River diversion project, the less they support it.** When initially asked, just under half of state voters (47 percent) indicate support for “the state of New Mexico helping to fund the construction of a pipeline to divert water from the Gila River in western New Mexico over the Continental Divide to cities and farms in southwestern New Mexico.” Initial support exceeds this level only slightly in the Southwestern region that would be the beneficiary of such a project (53 percent support).

Support diminishes after a brief explanation of why diversion is being considered and what it would entail, declining both statewide (to 39 percent) and in the Southwest (49 percent): *“In 2004, Congress enacted the Arizona Water Settlement Act to settle water disputes between one Native American tribe in Arizona and a number of other parties. As part of the settlement, the law provides up to 66 million dollars in federal money that could be used for any project that addresses water supply issues, and up to 62 million dollars in federal funds if the state builds a water pipeline to divert water from the Gila River. New Mexico would have to cover the rest of the cost of the pipeline, and would have to pay Arizona for the amount of water it takes out of the Gila River every year. There is not yet a set plan for where exactly the pipeline would run, but some proposals divert the river water to Deming and others to Las Cruces.”*

Initial and Informed Views of Gila River Diversion Project – Statewide



Support is well below majority levels in every region of the state, and with most key sub-groups. For example, support is weak among such important voter groups as Independents (34 percent support), seniors (26 percent), and rural voters (26 percent).

This project is clearly not a partisan issue. In fact, support is fairly flat across the political spectrum. Initially just 49 percent of Republicans and 48 percent of Democrats support this project. Again, support declines further as voters learn more – support declines to only 44 percent of GOP voters and 38 percent among Democrats.

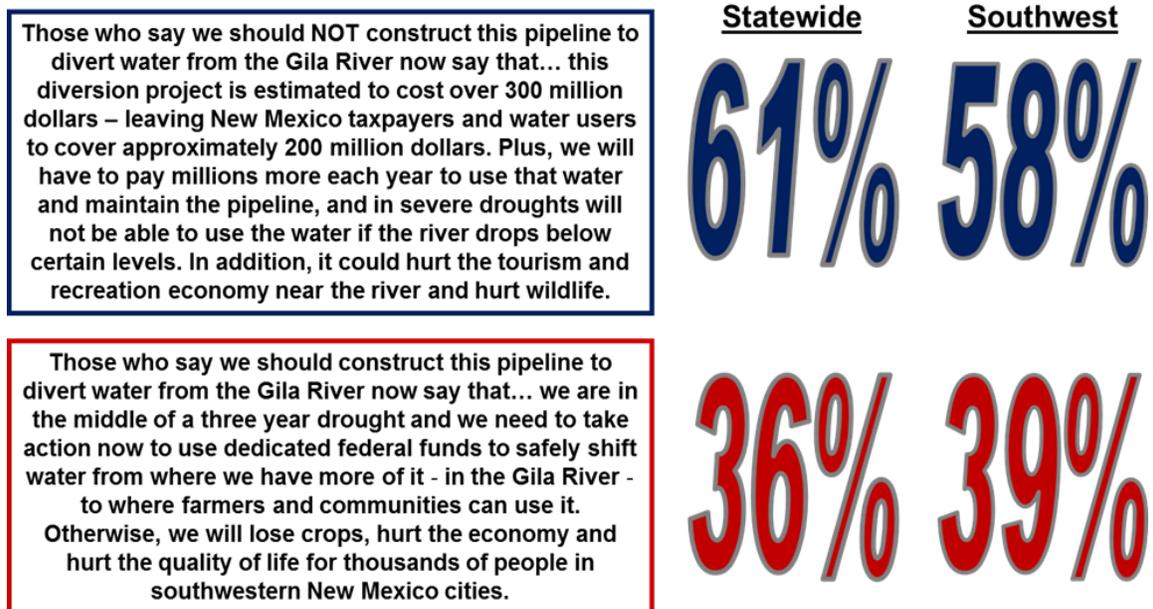
- ❑ **Voters are more likely to view the project as a “band-aid.”** One of the interesting dynamics evident in the focus groups was confirmed by the survey. A solid majority of 69 percent indicate they view the project as “a temporary fix that will NOT permanently help to solve the water supply problems in part of our state,” while just 23 percent perceive it to be a “long-term solution that will permanently help to solve the water supply problems in part of our state.”
- ❑ **The project costs and the impact the diversion would have on wildlife and the health of the river are perceived as two of the biggest negatives.** Respondents were asked about a number of issues related to the project, and whether that would be affected positively or negatively by the river diversion:

Summary of Potential Impacts ranked by % Negative Effect

<i>Impact</i>	%Negative	%Positive
Wildlife and fish in the Gila River	72%	22%
The health of the Gila River	70%	20%
The amount you pay in taxes	68%	22%
The state budget	68%	23%
The amount you pay on your water bill each month	50%	30%
Outdoor recreation, such as fishing, rafting and birding	47%	45%
The state of New Mexico	34%	59%
Farmers and ranchers throughout New Mexico	24%	68%

Voters do believe that diverting water from the Gila River will benefit farmers and ranchers as evidenced in the previous graph. However, those whose livelihoods are dependent on agriculture are mixed in their views of the proposal – 55 percent support it initially, dropping to 44 percent after they hear more. Two-thirds (67 percent) of those with ag-related incomes see the project as a temporary fix, rather than a long-term solution (25 percent).

- ❑ When respondents hear both sides of the issue, they continue to side with opponents of the diversion project rather than supporters:



- ❑ Fewer than one-in-three say they are willing to pay more in taxes to build this kind of a water pipeline (31 percent). There is not a single sub-group among which a majority indicates a willingness to “pay more in taxes in order to fund construction of a pipeline to divert water from the Gila River.”
- ❑ There is also a strong sense that a diversion should only be sought if all other reasonable alternatives have been explored. Three-quarters (75 percent) say that New Mexico should “come up with its own solutions to its water problems so it can have greater control over how it uses its water,” rather than “invest in this specific project that Congress authorized so it can take advantage of federal funds designated for this water pipeline.” In fact, every single alternative to diversions that was tested receives no less than 85 percent support.

**Summary of Ways to Address Water Problems
Ranked by % Strong Support**

<i>Ways to Address Water Problems</i>	%Strong Support	%Total Support
Encouraging greater water conservation by people in their homes, such as rebates for water efficiency appliances, use of drought tolerant plants in landscaping, etc.	84%	93%
Replacing outdated water infrastructure to reduce leaking and waste of water, such as replacing aging pipes in city water systems	78%	90%
Providing state incentives for farmers and ranchers to invest in	77%	92%

water-saving irrigation systems and practices and thereby use water more efficiently		
Building desalination plants to remove salt from underground water and make it suitable for drinking	62%	87%

In Conclusion

The survey finds clear concern about water issues and rivers specifically among state voters. Voters reject diversions in concept, instead preferring to exhaust other alternatives first – and register strong support for at least four other options that cities and the state could explore. Views of the specific Gila River project are fairly divided at first, but then drop off as respondents hear more about the costs and how it would work. Only one-in-three are willing to pay increased taxes in order to fund this specific project. Majorities see this project as a temporary fix, rather than a long-term solution, and prefer local solutions to this type of partially federally funded project. While voters do believe it would help farmers, they perceive it as likely having a negative impact on state coffers, taxes, and the Gila River itself.