

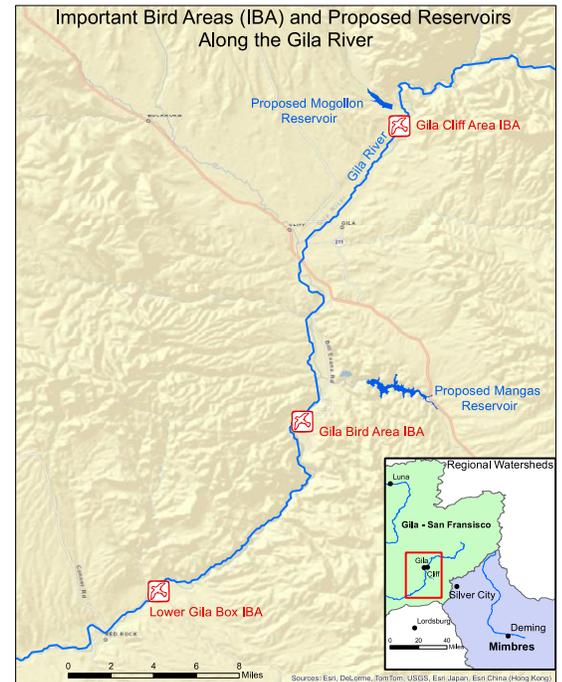
# SOUTHWESTERN NEW MEXICO AUDUBON AND GILA NATIVE PLANT SOCIETY

## POSITION PAPER ON PROTECTION OF THE GILA RIVER

### THE GILA: A RIVER THAT SUSTAINS OUR COMMUNITY

The Gila is a river of national significance and New Mexico's last major free-flowing river. The water in the river sustains the largest contiguous stretch of multi-aged cottonwood-willow forest remaining in New Mexico. Both small floods and high-flow events are important for establishment and maintenance of this riparian forest. The native trees in this well-watered environment have largely prevented invasion by the exotic salt cedar.

The Gila's riparian forest is home to one of the largest concentrations of breeding birds in North America. Over 200 documented bird species use the extensive riparian ecosystem. Avian Species of Greatest Conservation Need<sup>1</sup> dependent on natural Gila River flow regimes include the Abert's Towhee, the Bell's Vireo, the Common Black Hawk, the Gila Woodpecker, the Southwestern Willow Flycatcher, and the Yellow-billed Cuckoo. Audubon has designated three Important Bird Areas along a 60-mile reach of the Gila River that are vital to conserving birds and other biodiversity. Audubon's beginnings in New Mexico are connected to this area, as members organized to fight dams in the 1960s and formed the first New Mexico chapter, Southwestern New Mexico Audubon.



Although there are a few small irrigation ditch diversions, as well as a small below surface dam to divert water into Bill Evans Lake, the Gila River is not channelized and is free to flow wherever and create its own channels according to the laws of nature. This free-flowing river provides habitat for native desert fish that have disappeared from many other southwestern rivers. It is one of the most intact native fish communities in the Lower Colorado River Basin. The Gila's waters include the federally endangered loach minnow and spike dace in the Valley reaches and federally threatened Gila trout in the headwaters.<sup>2</sup> As Dutch Salmon, a long-time champion of the Gila, said in a 2004 Albuquerque Journal editorial, "Despite a modicum of irrigation in the Cliff/Gila, Redrock, and Virden communities, and a diversion at Bill Evans Lake for mining uses, the Gila remains a perennial and largely unregulated flow; it persists through drought and counts its floods as revival events."

### THE THREAT OF A NEW GILA RIVER DIVERSION AND PIPELINE

In 2004, Congress enacted the Arizona Water Settlement Act (AWSA) to settle water disputes between the Gila River Indian Community and all parties. Under the AWSA, Congress authorized projects to meet water supply demands in southwestern New Mexico. New Mexico will receive \$66 million in federal funds for *any* water supply project including water reuse and conservation, irrigation efficiencies and watershed restoration. If the New Mexico Interstate Stream Commission (ISC) chooses a water development project

<sup>1</sup> *Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy for New Mexico*. New Mexico Department of Game and Fish. 2006.

<sup>2</sup> A study on how much water the Gila River needs to support a healthy ecosystem and the probable effects of altering streamflow is currently underway by The Nature Conservancy New Mexico chapter.

such as dams or diversions, the state will receive an additional \$34 to \$62 million to divert up to 14,000 acre-feet of water per year from the Gila and San Francisco Rivers. The New Mexico ISC is scheduled to make a preliminary decision whether to build a diversion and pipeline by August 14, 2014. A final decision is slated for Nov. 14, 2014<sup>3</sup>. If a diversion is approved, New Mexico will have to purchase Colorado River water from the Central Arizona Project to satisfy its obligation to replace newly diverted Gila River water for the Gila Indian River Community and other downstream Arizona water users. A project proposal submitted by Deming would divert up to 10,000 acre-feet from the Gila and create reservoirs on both Mogollon and Mangas Creek. Diversion of river water would reduce small floods and high-flow pulses that are important for the plant and animal life in this riparian corridor. The water stored in the Mangas reservoir would also be piped across the continental divide to Deming or potentially Las Cruces and the Rio Grande River.

#### **WHO PAYS FOR A NEW LARGE-SCALE DIVERSION, PIPELINE AND THE WATER?**

The estimated cost of constructing the Deming pipeline and diversions has ranged from \$190 to \$323 million. The maximum federal subsidy is only \$128 million. The operation and maintenance costs of a diversion and pipeline are estimated to be more than \$4 million per year. Also for every acre-foot diverted, New Mexico has to purchase an equivalent amount of water for the Gila Indian River Community and other downstream Arizona water users from the Central Arizona Project (at a current anticipated yearly cost of around \$2 million). There is no guarantee that exchange water will be available in the future to purchase from the Central Arizona Project as required. Costs in excess of the federal subsidies will have to borne by state taxpayers and/or the New Mexico water users.

#### **WHAT ARE THE ALTERNATIVES TO PIPING THE GILA?**

Local stakeholders have submitted over a dozen projects to the New Mexico ISC for meeting the future water demands of the four southwestern counties. These include improvements to municipal water systems, water reuse and conservation, irrigation efficiencies and watershed restoration. The \$66 million available through the AWSA could fund most of these projects at no taxpayer expense.

New Mexico derives an appreciable and important economic benefit from the free flow of water through the Gila River Basin. Tourism is the second largest industry in New Mexico. New Mexico's fish and wildlife habitat contributes almost \$6.1 billion to our state economy through hunting, fishing and outdoor recreation. Tourism and outdoor recreation play a substantial role in increasing employment and wage levels in rural communities.<sup>4</sup> Census data indicates that the population of those 65 and older in Grant County has grown from 16.5% to 22.1% over the past decade.<sup>5</sup> Much of this population shift is due to retirees attracted by the abundant natural resources in our region, bringing in dollars earned elsewhere but spent mostly locally. The membership of Southwestern New Mexico Audubon and Gila Native Plant Society has increased with the influx of these retirees.

Southwestern New Mexico Audubon and Gila Native Plant Society are in favor of cost-effective, non-diversion alternatives that protect the free-flow of the Gila River yet provide critical water and wastewater infrastructure and conserve municipal and agricultural water supplies in the four county region. This would be the best economic and ecologic outcome for residents of Southwest New Mexico. We encourage the ISC to protect the Gila River from diversions.

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<sup>3</sup> The New Mexico Interstate Stream Commission is tasked with coordinating the review of all proposals. Full documentation of proposals can be obtained at the ISC's New Mexico Arizona Water Settlements Act website, <http://nmawsa.org/library>.

<sup>4</sup> To learn more about the economic benefits of conservation and restoration of Southern New Mexico's natural resources download this report: [http://nm.audubon.org/sites/default/files/documents/economicreportnm\\_naturalassets\\_0.pdf](http://nm.audubon.org/sites/default/files/documents/economicreportnm_naturalassets_0.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> <http://quickfacts.census.gov>