

Conservation of Gila ecology more than figures on a chart

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Craig Roepke, Deputy Director of the New Mexico Interstate Stream Commission, in a response to Beth Bardwell's op-ed of Nov. 14, defends several proposed diversions of the Gila River that he claims "would only improve the Gila's environment by skimming a fraction off the top of flood and higher flows, saving that water and returning some to the river when flows drop below what is necessary to sustain the Gila's aquatic and riparian ecology."



Conservation of the Gila ecology and recreation is more than a few cubic feet per second on a chart. What's the point of a hypothetical minimal flow if what are now roadless reaches of the Gila have been turned from a remote, rugged and uniquely rich riparian area into an industrialized zone?

It is a rueful irony that the historical Hooker damsite, for 30 years now a disgraced and discarded plan for a dam in the celebrated Gila Box Canyon, has been revived as the ISC's latest, poorly disguised fist in the wilderness.

Nor does Roepke have anything to say about the other ancillary negatives that attach to this project – capital costs most often estimated at \$300 million-plus; tons of concrete sufficient to divert 350 cfs; bulldozers, backhoes and other land movers to excavate a 20-foot wide canal and/or 8- to 10-foot diameter pipeline to carry the 350 cfs to a side canyon reservoir miles away; the degradation of a significant amount of private land; major construction in a de facto wilderness; and the absolute loss of nearly one-third of the take.

Roepke has told stakeholders that reservoir evaporation could be 15 percent to 30 percent depending upon surface area and volume of a reservoir. And since the total yearly diversion from the Gila would average 10,000 acre-feet, that means that, yearly, up to 3,000 acre-feet, or almost one-third, will sail off with the clouds, benefitting neither city, nor farm, nor fish, nor fisherman here at home.

Indeed, 3,000 acre-feet is more than the yearly consumptive use of municipal water for the nearby Silver City area (2,800 acre-feet) serving 20,000 people.

These evaporation losses would be the responsibility of the New Mexico taxpayer.

At the worst levels of drought, the Gila has shown it can deliver at least 10 cfs to the farm country near Cliff. We should not forget that the "drying" of the river is human caused; that final cfs should be held in the river in compensation and the farmers compensated by the market through a short-term lease.