



New Mexico Regional Water Planning Summary Report

**MAIN
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NEW MEXICO**

**Insights from the New
Mexico Interstate Stream
Commission's 2024 Water
Planning Open Houses**

Associated with the
Implementation of New
Mexico's Water Security
Planning Act (WSPA)



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Introduction

Ensuring a resilient water future for New Mexico's next generations will take all of us working together, especially as ongoing drought and climate change threaten to reduce surface-water, including water for recharging groundwater, by 25 percent over the next 50 years. As called for by the 50-Year Water Action Plan, the New Mexico Interstate Stream Commission (NMISC) is working to engage New Mexicans across the state in revitalizing regional water planning.

[The Water Security Planning Act \(WSPA\)](#), passed in 2023, marks a new era in water planning in New Mexico. It creates a roadmap for regional water planning and implementation that prioritizes the unique needs of local communities, makes use of the best available science and data, and maintains compliance with federal and state laws.

Over the course of six months in 2024, the NMISC collected feedback from more than 2,300 New Mexicans from all over the state at a series of 16 in-person Open Houses and one online open house. This broke down to 710+ New Mexicans who participated in-person and 1600+ that participated online.

During these Open Houses, participants voiced their priorities and concerns about New Mexico's water future and the regional water planning process. They

answered questions related to how the state should draw regional boundaries, how water regions should be governed, and how regions should plan for a drier future. In total, NMISC gathered more than 25,000 individual feedback points, collected through surveys, written comments, and interactive activities. Notably, more than half of participants (54 percent) had never been involved in water planning before.

These 25,000 data points from New Mexicans have been organized, coded, analyzed and compiled into two reports:

- an Engagement Report that summarizes results and themes of public input, and
- an Observations and Considerations Report that draws conclusions based on public input

The full reports are available online at:

MainStreamNM.org/Data-and-Reports

This Summary Report provides a brief overview of the findings presented in the two longer reports, completing a critical step in New Mexico's journey to developing the rule set and guidelines for a balanced water future.



Executive Summary

Summary of Critical Policy Considerations

The insights gathered during the public-engagement process highlight several critical priorities for New Mexico's water future under the WSPA. These considerations emphasize the need for transparent governance, sustainable resource management, and regional collaboration.

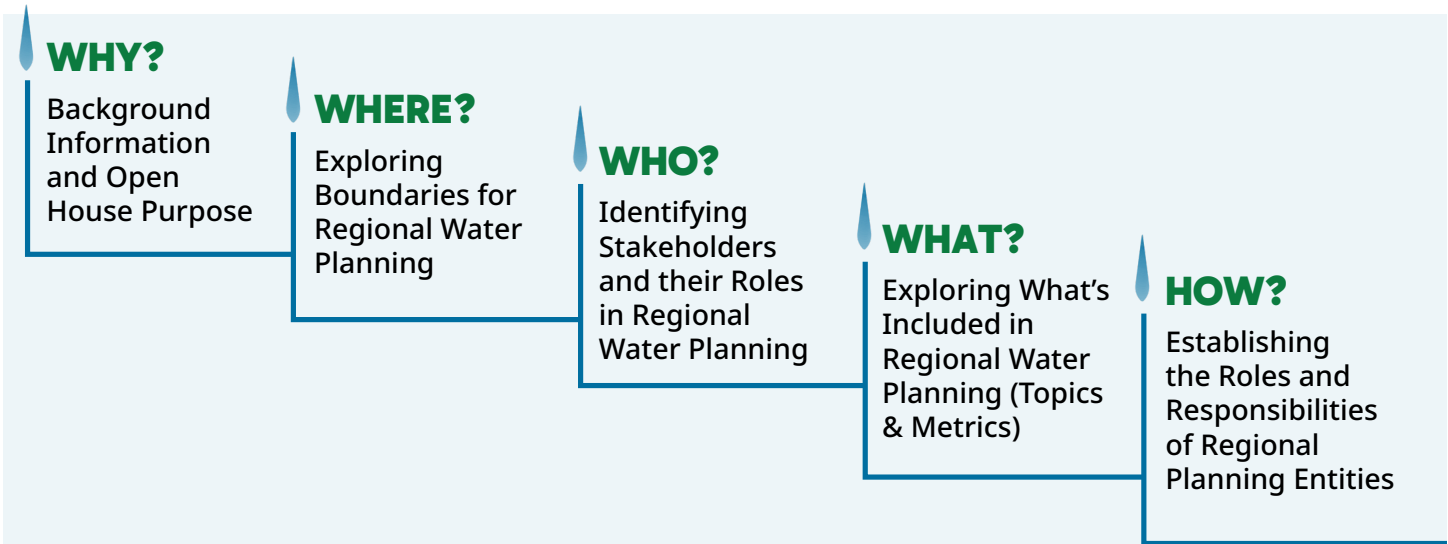
Key Themes Include

- **Hydrology Boundaries for Regional Planning**
Aligning regional boundaries with hydrological features ensures water management that reflects natural flows and promotes effective, localized solutions for shared water sources.
- **Centralized Water Data Metrics**
A centralized water data platform will support regional entities, streamline collaborations, and provide transparency across planning and implementation processes.
- **Transparent Governance and Public Engagement**
Clear governance structures, public involvement, and metrics to track progress are essential for building trust and ensuring accountability in regional water planning.
- **Stakeholder Leadership and Representation**
Effective regional planning requires participation from Pueblos, Tribes, and Nations, and from local governments, agricultural users, acequia associations, conservation districts, and others. The public supported fixed terms, expertise in water, and residency requirements for representatives of regional entities.
- **Environmental Sustainability**
Conservation, watershed health, and the use of innovative technologies should guide planning efforts to balance immediate needs with long-term ecological and water-security goals.



Findings

During the in-person Open Houses, participants were asked to answer a series of 20 multiple choice and open-ended questions related to water priorities, regional boundaries and governance, and how planning regions should function. Online participants were asked the same questions and 11 additional questions. Questions broadly fell into five categories:



Statewide Concerns and Priorities

Respondents across the state reported similar concerns about New Mexico's water future. From Albuquerque to Artesia and Roswell to Silver City, participants want to prioritize protecting aquifers and river flows to ensure enough water is available for future generations. In short, New Mexicans want balance. They value conservation, stewardship, and the right to responsibly use New Mexico's water.

Key Data Highlights

- Question 3: "Water availability" was the most frequently selected response related to the state's water challenges.
- Question 4: A majority of respondents said they want to protect above- and below-ground water resources.
- Question 14: Open-ended comments showed significant support for a statewide education campaign, not only for students in K-12 schools, but also for the general public, to help improve water literacy and foster a civic-minded spirit of collaboration.
- Question 2: When New Mexicans think about planning for their water future, water availability is most important to them, followed by both water conservation and protecting environmental habitats.
- Respondents emphasized the need for projects that enhance water storage, supply, conservation, and watershed health, and they supported data-driven, measurable goals for these initiatives.
- Other critical concerns included water quality, water planning/governance, and environmental stewardship.



Key Regional Differences

While statewide themes emerged, some priorities varied by region. Some notable regional differences include:

- In Northwest New Mexico, participants focused on respecting tribal water rights, preserving acequias and balancing urban-rural water needs.
- In Northeast New Mexico, participants' concerns focus on agricultural water use and protecting small-scale irrigation systems.
- In Southwest New Mexico, participants prioritized drought resilience and ecological resource management in agricultural regions.
- In Southeast New Mexico, participants valued groundwater, underscoring the need for localized infrastructure and groundwater monitoring projects.

Regional Boundaries

As part of the Water Security Planning Act, the boundaries of New Mexico's water regions are being reexamined. When asked how we might redraw the lines, the majority of Open House participants (74%) said they prefer hydrology-based divisions over political or administrative boundaries.

Drawing lines based on hydrology is consistent with the practices of other Western states, including Utah, Colorado, and California. Hydrological boundaries consider surface and groundwater sources, ensuring that water management efforts are tied to shared water sources rather than political lines.

Other key considerations that can inform boundary-making include:

- To support effective water management, boundaries also could take into consideration water-data availability and existing interstate water compacts.
- Based on participant input — and the inherently overlapping and interconnected nature of both hydrological and administrative systems — key observations propose flexible “soft edges” along boundaries, which would allow regions to collaborate on overlapping needs and engage in multi-regional planning where necessary.
- The number and size of regions should reflect a balance between avoiding very large regions that require significant travel to meetings and accounting for capacity constraints to manage the planning process in rural regions.
- Travel constraints could be mitigated by offering ways to engage virtually/online.
- Establishing sub-areas within large regions could help address specific needs and opportunities within each region (e.g., ecosystems, rural and urban differences, etc.).

Regional Leadership: Establishing the “Who” of Regional Planning

A series of Open House questions aimed to discern whom respondents thought should lead each region’s water-planning efforts in New Mexico. Attendees affirmed that effective planning depends on the involvement of a diverse array of stakeholders, including Pueblos, Tribes, and Nations, leaders of local governments, water rights holders, acequia associations, agricultural water users, conservation districts, and others.

Open House attendees favored the use of a variety of engagement tactics to reach as many community members as possible, including public meetings, newsletters, focus groups, and ways to engage online. Overwhelmingly, the responses indicated a desire to build trust, representation, and accountability within the governance process.

Key Takeaways

- Participants expressed strong support for transparent, equitable governance of water regions, calling for structures that represent diverse stakeholders, and reflect local needs. This could include a stakeholder mapping process to identify key voices within each region.
- Participants reported a preference for establishing water planning entities with consistent memberships representing key regional water interests and organizations as well as elected “at-large” members.
- Participants supported fixed terms for members (greater than two years) and emphasized that members should reside within the region and have relevant water expertise.
- Participants recommended both in-person and virtual engagement to maximize participation, particularly in large or rural regions where travel may be a barrier. Online formats have proven effective for reaching new participants and inviting diverse perspectives.
- Ensuring resources are available for interpretation and translation as needed can help create a more equitable planning process.

Regional Planning: How It Should Work

Once boundaries have been drawn and governance structures implemented, the work of water planning can begin. Open House participants were asked how this process should work — and their answers reflect a strong desire for clear, measurable goals and projects validated by data and tracked using specific metrics. Their answers also reflected a desire for flexibility to allow regional plans to reflect the character, identity, and landscape of each region.

Plans, respondents said, should prioritize addressing the following key questions within each region:

- **Water availability:** Understanding how much water is currently available for use.
- **Future water availability:** Assessing water supply projections for the future, including the impacts of climate change.
- **Balancing water availability and needs:** Developing strategies to align regional water use with current and future water availability.
- **Regional strategy identification and prioritization:** Clearly identifying and prioritizing programs, projects, and policies that will support water security.

Public Welfare and Future Generations

The term “public welfare” currently informs water management in New Mexico, yet it is undefined in New Mexico’s state water code. This presents challenges in applying public welfare criteria in water administration. Under WSPA, regional water planning entities are given the opportunity to develop region-specific statements related to public welfare. Such statements could include considerations of public health, environmental protection, economic interests, cultural values and/or the needs of future generations. Community defined public welfare statements are intended to enhance buy-in for the planning process, motivate plan implementation, and inform state water administration decisions.

Grant and Loan Approval Requirements

Nearly 90 percent of participants preferred allocating grants and loans based on specific criteria. They suggested that funding criteria should prioritize non-competitive allocations based on established evaluation standards.

Per the WSPA, state funding, if made available by the legislature, will support planning activities conducted by regional planning entities. These activities could include identifying and prioritizing water-security projects, programs, and policies. Once the planning process is complete, construction of identified projects will rely on funding from local, other state, federal, and private sources.

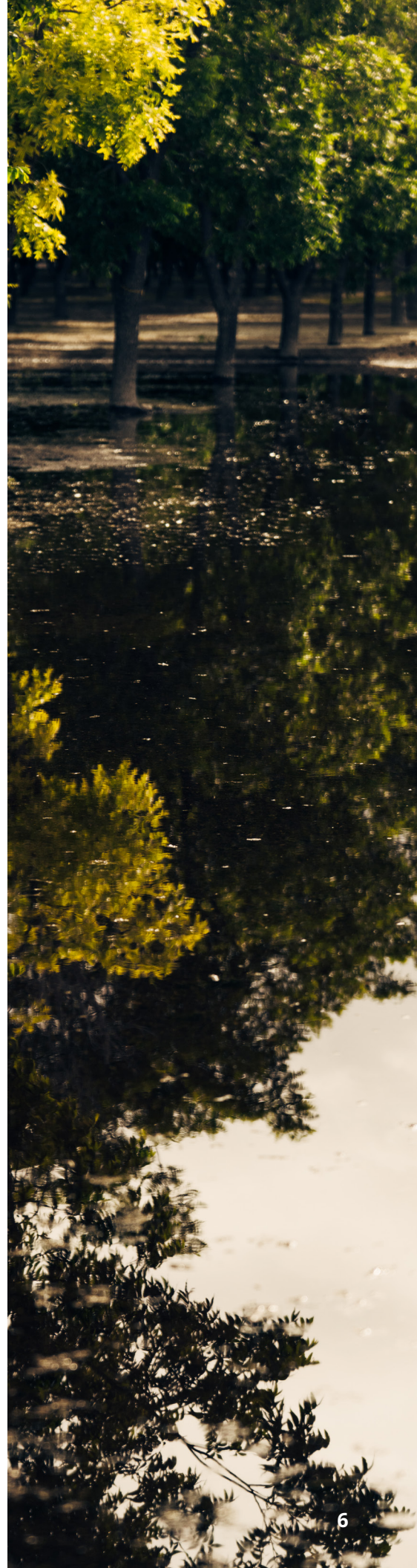
Participants recommended that NMISC collaborate with other state agencies to continue to implement the 2019 Water Data Act, which creates a centralized platform for accessing water data, providing critical support to planning entities.

Implementation Metrics and Reporting

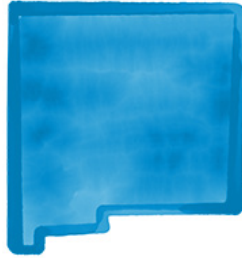
To track progress, respondents supported a series of common performance metrics, including:

- Project timelines and funding status
- Impact on regional and adjacent water balances
- Environmental and ecological effects

An online dashboard was identified as a way to enable consistent reporting by providing transparency and helping assess the efficacy of projects over time.



Next Steps for NMISC



Timeline for Rules and Guidelines

In early 2025, NMISC will release a set of rules and guidelines based on the input collected in 2024. The public will be invited to review and provide feedback. These rules will establish the new framework for regional water planning in New Mexico. NMISC is on track to finalize rules and guidelines by mid-2025 and begin implementation.

Ongoing Community Engagement and Implementation Support

Water planning is intended to be ongoing and iterative. NMISC will continue to engage with the public and support regional entities as they implement their water security plans. By helping regional entities access data, track metrics, and find funding, NMISC will ensure that each region can meet its water-security goals in a way that aligns with statewide priorities and the unique needs of each community.

Water Security Tribal Advisory Council

In parallel to the public engagement in 2024, NMISC worked with the New Mexico Indian Affairs Department to convene a Water Security Tribal Advisory Council. NMISC is committed to continue to engage with New Mexico's Pueblos, Tribes and Nations and effectively incorporate tribal communities and their needs in the planning process.

Stay Engaged

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