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Basin Pumping Could Be Boon to the Region

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Almost every day brings more bad news about the drought and lack of water in New Mexico. It is time for solutions.

Our group, Augustin Plains Ranch, is proposing a solution which would bring an average of 54,000 new acre-feet of water per year to the Middle Rio Grande Valley. The visionary new project would use the combination of groundwater reserves and the capture of rainwater from the surrounding hills to provide a vast new source of water for our drought-suffering state.

Located at an elevation of 7,000 feet west of Socorro, the Augustin Plains constitute a unique hydrogeological formation which, we believe, will permit us to undertake such a beneficial project.

Under the plains lies a vast, underground reserve of fresh water, stored there after millions of years of runoff, under several hundred feet of rock and sediment fill. Hydrology reports show that it could contain as much as 50 million acre-feet of water.

The water is there because it is held in an essentially closed basin. Simply put, only small amounts might have escaped to either the Rio Grande or the Gila watersheds. Average rainfall over the plains is over 1 million acre-feet per year. Like everywhere else in New Mexico the rainfall does not increase the amount of water in the basin because most of it evaporates.

The revolutionary aspect of our proposal is that it does not depend solely on existing state surface or groundwater resources, both of which are currently unsustainably overtaxed, but uses both groundwater and recapture of rainfall.

Consider this statistic from the New Mexico Water Resources Research Institute: The average yearly precipitation in New Mexico is 85.3 million acre-feet, yet 82 million acre-feet are lost to evaporation. Recovering only 0.1 percent of the water that evaporates would supply close to the entire water consumption of Albuquerque.

We propose to pump water from this vast resource and convey it to the Middle Rio Grande Valley and greater Albuquerque metropolitan area. This production would allow the Rio Grande river water currently diverted to the urban area to stay in the river for the benefit of the valley's farmers, as well as the river's habitats, ecology and endangered species.

In Elephant Butte, tourism would see benefit.

We propose to do this without harm to the local community and to take advantage of the ranch's unique location to significantly increase the recharge in the basin both naturally and through enhanced recharge and storage structures. Instead of evaporating as it does now, rainfall would recharge the water that has been pumped out of the reservoir.

The water system we propose would add a sustainable supply of as much as 54,000 acre-feet of water yearly, to be consumed by farmers, ranchers and people of the Middle Rio Grande Valley, while significantly improving the environmental conditions of the Rio Grande.

All of this would be done using private finance, respecting the laws of the state.

The people living in and around the Augustin Plains are justifiably concerned that their lifestyle could be put in jeopardy by our plan. We are committed to working in partnership with them, ensuring that their local water supplies are improved in quantity, quality and reliability. In addition, we believe that the local community should receive a direct economic benefit from the project by becoming partners with us in the project.

We realize our proposal is considered contentious. But what if we are right? Isn't it worthwhile for New Mexico to explore this life changing possibility?