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FILE - In this May 9, 2021, photo a dam along the Rio Grande is seen near San Acacia, N.M. Forecasters with the National Weather Service are delivering good news for cities and farmers who depend on two major rivers in the southwestern U.S. The headwaters of the Rio Grande and the Pecos River recorded some of the best snowfall in years, resulting in spring runoff that will provide a major boost to reservoirs along the rivers. (AP Photo/Susan Montoya Bryan, File) [Read More](#)

BY SUSAN MONTOYA BRYAN

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ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. (AP) — A commission that oversees how the Rio Grande is managed and shared among three Western states has adopted a recommendation that could set the stage for more involvement by Native American tribes that depend on the river.

The Rio Grande Compact Commission voted unanimously Friday during its annual meeting in Santa Fe to direct its legal and engineering advisers to look into developing protocols for formal discussions with six pueblos that border the river in central New Mexico.

Pueblo leaders have been seeking a seat at the table for years, saying their water rights have never been

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irrigation district to provide for irrigation and flood control for pueblo lands.

Isleta Pueblo Gov. Max Zuni told the commission that progress has been made over the last year after the Interior Department established a federal team to assess the feasibility of settling the pueblos' claims to the

river. He requested that commissioners extend an invitation to the pueblos to address the commission at its next annual meeting.

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Zuni said any discussion of a water rights settlement with Isleta, Cochiti, Santo Domingo, San Felipe, Santa Ana and Sandia pueblos would be of interest to the commission, which is made up of officials from Colorado, New Mexico and Texas. Each state is responsible for delivering a certain amount of water to downstream users each year.

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While record snowpack in the mountains of southern Colorado and northern New Mexico is resulting in [spring runoff not seen in years](#), commissioners acknowledged that future supplies remain uncertain as the region remains locked in a [long-term drought](#).

For Isleta Pueblo, Zuni said the river is more than just a source of water for crops.

“We use it for traditional purposes,” he said. “I don’t know how we could quantify that amount of water but carrying on our traditions and our customs, our water is very essential to us. It is important to us, our livelihood. That river is very sacred.”

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One of the longest rivers in North America, the Rio Grande supplies water for more than 6 million people and 2 million acres of land in the U.S. and Mexico.

There has been much [disagreement over management over the decades](#), including one fight between New Mexico and Texas that is still pending before the U.S. Supreme Court. The states have reached a proposed settlement, and commissioners at Friday’s meeting said they were hopeful a federal judge serving as special master will recommend approval of the agreement.

The commission’s engineers also presented accounting sheets for water deliveries based on a [new accounting method](#) that was approved last fall. That allowed the engineers to reconcile deliveries dating back to 2011 based on more timely streamflow and reservoir storage records and other data.

They say New Mexico still owes Texas about 93,000 acre feet of water. An acre foot is roughly enough to serve two to three U.S. households annually.

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“We need that water,” said Bobby Skov, who represents Texas on the commission.

He also pointed to concerns his state has about evaporative losses in reservoirs along the Rio Grande, a proposed copper mine in New Mexico that he said could effect flows to the river and the build-up of sediment that is compromising reservoir storage capacities.

Mike Hamman, New Mexico’s state engineer and a member of the commission, noted that New Mexico marked its worst wildfire season on record in 2022 and that watersheds that feed the Rio Grande were damaged. That means there will be higher flows of ash and debris coming off the mountains and that runoff patterns will be altered for years to come.

Hamman said the Rio Grande system was designed over the last century to deal with flood control and the delivery of water downstream, but the pressures of climate change and the needs of endangered species have shifted the mission and complicated management.

He said it’s time to reevaluate how managers can balance demands on the Rio Grande.

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“We can no longer afford to be micro-focused on our own interests,” he said. “This is one complete system. We need to manage it that way in order for us to survive as our water systems evolve here in the 21st century and that means some creativity and some work in Congress and work within our legislatures to make sure we can pull it off together.”





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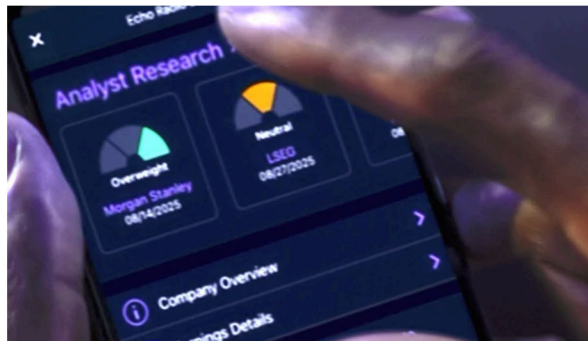
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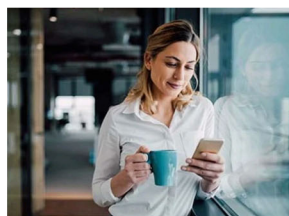
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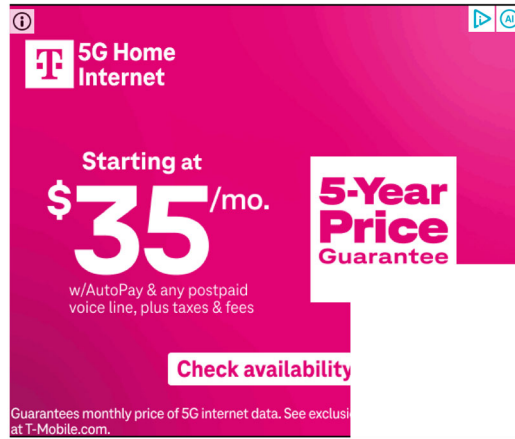
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