

OPEN THE FLOODGATES

Written by By Kevin Opsahl Sun Correspondent
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U. S. Senator visits Navajo-Gallup water treatment plant; talks infrastructure while touting legislation

U.S. Sen. Martin Heinrich, D-N.M., toured the Cutter Lateral Water Treatment Plant on May 4 to promote a recently-passed senate bill that could impact the water Gallup residents use for waste and drinking.

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Although the plant that's located more than 100 miles outside of Gallup won't help deliver water to the city, it's one that local officials have visited and kept tabs on since it is part of the broader \$1 billion-plus Navajo-Gallup Water Supply Project.

The NGWSP consists of two pipelines: Cutter Lateral and San Juan Lateral, both of which go north to south and serve Native and non-Native communities.

Heinrich said even though only one of the two NGWSP pipelines, the San Juan Lateral, will impact Gallup directly, the Cutter plant should be seen by city residents and officials as "a symbol of the progress we're making on the entire system."

"This is an enormous investment in clean water and it's exactly what we should be doing in places like Gallup, where we have seen the groundwater retreat so quickly over the last two decades," Heinrich said. "We need to get off of those wells and onto a more sustainable supply and the NGWSP is that solution."

A project decades in the making, the NGWSP will take water from the San Juan River to Native American communities in New Mexico and Gallup, where the quantity and quality of the ground water won't be able to meet the needs of the area if nothing is done.

The Cutter Lateral was completed in late 2020 and the San Juan Lateral is still under construction. It is expected to be fully complete before the end of the decade.

Cutter Lateral is on the eastern side of the state. San Juan Lateral is to the west of it and will also serve unincorporated McKinley County and several water districts and associations.

"Portions of the pipeline just north of Gallup will actually begin delivering non-project water — ground water — hopefully this summer and delivering that to the Gallup regional system and Navajo communities surrounding Gallup," Pat Page, project construction engineer in the Four Corners Construction Office of the Bureau of Reclamation, said regarding the San Juan Lateral.

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“Right now, they rely 100 percent on ground water and this will provide a new source of water for them — a surface water source from the San Juan River Basin.”

In a prepared statement to the *Sun*, Heinrich said he is “committed” to the San Juan Lateral’s completion and hopes it is just as successful as Cutter Lateral.

“Every aspect of the Navajo Gallup Water Supply Project is critical to finally delivering clean drinking water to communities throughout Northwest New Mexico and I will fight to make sure each reaches the finish line,” he said.

In an interview, Mayor Louis Bonaguidi spoke about the scope of the city’s water supply problem. Bonaguidi said Gallup has 16 wells, each of them 3,000 feet deep, which have been drawing water out of a high plains desert environment for 60-plus years.

“It’s slowly mining the water out — it’s good water, great water — but the thing is, at some point, we’re going to run out of water,” he said.

Bonaguidi said a geographical survey done 25 years ago said that within three to four decades, Gallup’s water supply would be depleted.

“They couldn’t give you an approximate [date],” he said.

Bonaguidi and other city officials later worked with the Navajo Nation to be part of the NGWSP.

“We went to the tribe and said, you know, ‘Look, we need help here. We need water,’” the mayor said.

Bonaguidi said the city has been working on a payment system for the water and has been

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building large storage tanks to hold it.

“We’re working on our end, for sure,” he said.

Even though the Cutter pipeline won’t deliver water to Gallup, Bonaguidi visited the facility for its opening in October “to show them we appreciate their help in getting the water.”

He praised the state’s two U.S. Senators, Heinrich and Ben Ray Luján, D-N.M., for doing their part on the NGWSP and called on others at the Bureau of Reclamation and the state to finish the job.

Heinrich told the *Sun* the Cutter plant is “one of the more far-reaching investments” that the federal government has ever made to Indian Country. The facility is now in a testing and commissioning phase before October, when operation and maintenance responsibilities will be transferred to the Navajo Tribal Utility Authority.

“By providing clean drinking water to these communities, it changes lives and opens up all kinds of opportunities,” Heinrich said. “It’s a great example of how we should be spending federal tax dollars.”

At the end of the tour, the senator said he got a chance to taste the Cutter plant’s water.

“And it tasted exactly as you would hope it would,” Heinrich said.

The visit was also used to tout the Drinking Water and Wastewater Infrastructure Act that will provide more support for Environmental Protection Agency grants and loan funds for water infrastructure projects and potentially make more than \$35 billion dollars available for financing. The legislation also pledges a number of ways to help underserved populations.

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“Communities like Gallup will be able to apply for those funds,” Heinrich said. “I view that legislation as a down payment on what we really need to do nationwide. My hope is that ... we’ll be able to follow on President Biden’s American Jobs Plan and really make the kinds of investments in water infrastructure that we should have had 50 years ago in many of these communities.”

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