

Report: Gila River Diversion is Expensive, Unnecessary Boondoggle

Written by NM Voices for Children
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\$1 billion for river project would be better spent on education, child care

ALBUQUERQUE—The state's current plan to spend up to \$1 billion to divert water from the Gila River through a pipeline is ill conceived, particularly since the state has significant problems that would be more effectively addressed with such a significant level of funding. That's the main conclusion of a report released on October 15 by New Mexico Voices for Children. The report, "The Gila River Diversion: A drain on limited state resources that are better spent elsewhere," outlines the problems with the proposed Gila River Diversion project and the need for the proposed funds to be invested in programs that help kids and families. The report was released in advance of Friday's Interstate Stream Commission meeting at which the diversion project will be discussed.

"Water is a precious resource, but there are better, smarter and more cost-effective ways of meeting the state's water needs. Our children are also a precious resource, but we continue to allow them to rank at the bottom of the nation in well-being. That is unacceptable," said Veronica C. García, Ed.D., executive director of the child advocacy group. "We now have the highest child poverty rate in the nation. Children in poverty lack access to the opportunities that will help them achieve success in school and in life. Ensuring that they have every opportunity to succeed needs to be the state's top priority," she added.

"One billion to divert the Gila? This is an irreversible decision and huge questions remain about what they're promising and how it will be funded," said Trish Lopez, an Albuquerque resident with a two-year-old daughter who is among the local mothers standing with NM Voices in this matter. "A far more obvious priority is child wellness in New Mexico. Well-researched, evidence-based programs like home visiting for new parents can make enormous strides for our state at a fraction of this cost."

"We are asking the Interstate Stream Commission and our government leaders to please consider the needs of New Mexicans and the future of our state. It would be completely irresponsible to pour \$1 billion into a plan with only speculative benefits and such high economic and environmental costs," said first-time mom Jacqueline Miller of Roswell. "Our state is at the bottom of every list when it comes to child welfare. Instead of spending \$1 billion to devastate one of our state's most beautiful natural resources, we ought to be investing in our state's most valuable resource – our kids," she added.

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Using data available from the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, Interstate Stream Commission, and testimony to the state Legislature and Congress, NM Voices verified the exorbitant cost of the project and compared those numbers to the funding shortfalls still faced by the state's schools, early childhood education programs, and other services that are proven to improve outcomes for kids.

“The math is simple. The only way spending \$1 billion in our state makes sense is if, in the end, it results in more and better opportunities for our kids. The Gila River Diversion project's cost and outcomes just don't add up,” said Dr. García.