

‘We’ll survive’: Officials: Farmers have water despite early drying Rio Grande -

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“We’ll survive.”

That’s how Socorro County farmer Chris Lopez feels about the drying Rio Grande.

“They may make us cut back on the water, but if we’re able to water between the cutting, we’ll be able to make a crop. That’s what happened five or six years ago.”

That said, Lopez doesn’t remember a time when the Rio Grande has dried up in this area so early in the spring. His family farms along the river between Luis Lopez and San Antonio.

“It is completely dry in San Antonio,” Lopez said.

Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge Manager Kevin Cobble told El Defensor Chieftain last week the river is dry for a stretch of at least 14 miles, including on the refuge. Travelers will notice a completely dry Rio Grande as they drive over the river bridge on U.S. 380 in San Antonio.

“It started on the refuge and went north,” Cobble said. “I know it’s up to the bridge on 380 in San Antonio. It may be a little beyond that.”

“It usually doesn’t get this dry until the end of May,” Lopez said. “But then they’ll usually release the water to save the silvery minnow.”

A year ago, above average snow melt had the Rio Grande overflowing its banks in the Socorro area.

The early drying of the Rio Grande has threatened the silvery minnow on the refuge. It forced the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to perform a rescue of about 15,000 silvery minnows on the refuge.

The Bureau of Reclamation is coordinating with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to ensure fish rescue crews are active in the areas of the river that have dried. It is working with the Middle Rio Grande Conservancy District, Albuquerque Water Utility Authority, and other stakeholders on an operational pulse to facilitate silvery minnow egg collection efforts.

Cobble said the drying of the river could impact other endangered species that live on the refuge.

“It could have an impact on the willow flycatcher because it survives on water along the Rio Grande,” Cobble said. “In the worst case scenario, it could also affect the Mexican jumping mouse.”

Cobble said the drying up of the river this early has forced some change in irrigation plans on the refuge.

The silvery minnow and the southwestern willow flycatcher also call the Sevilleta National Wildlife Refuge home in northern Socorro County. The refuge upriver is faring better.

“The river is low on Sevilleta but we get a buffer from the San Acacia Dam,” Sevilleta National Wildlife Refuge Manager Kathy Granillo said. “It helps keep the river wet on our portion.”

Lack of snow

A dry winter is being blamed for the early drying of the river.

“It was one of the worst snow melts, if not the worst, in about 80 years,” Cobble said.

Middle Rio Grande Conservancy District chief hydrologist David Gensler said the water flowing in the river is about 1/6th of what it was last year when snow melt was above average.

“I think we had 18 percent of the snowpack we had last year,” Gensler said.

The lack of moisture in the winter had an effect on Lopez.

“Last winter, we didn’t get any moisture,” Lopez said. “I planted alfalfa in the fall and lost the entire crop.”

Gensler said the Rio Grande drying up this time of year used to not be that uncommon.

“It’s been since 1996 since we’ve had this kind of drying this early,” Gensler said. “Before that, it happened pretty regularly.”

Gensler said a change in regulations to protect species such as the silvery minnow forced water in storage to be released into the river earlier.

Lopez has a well, and has had to do some adjusting this spring. Lopez said he has done some shifting around with his chile crop.

Middle Rio Grande Conservancy District Board Member Valarie Moore agrees with Lopez that farmers won’t be affected as much by the drying of the river.

“Thankfully, we don’t have to entirely depend on the Rio Grande,” Moore said. “Thankfully, we have a lot of water stored in El Vado (Reservoir).”

She said moisture from the large snow melt the previous winter helped build up the supply.

The drying of the Rio Grande is expected to grow in the coming weeks according to a forecast by the Bureau of Reclamation.

“It’s really sad,” Cobble said.

Officials expect the river to dry within the Albuquerque reach later this spring or early summer before monsoon rains can perhaps provide some relief.

But Gensler expects farmers will be okay because of the water that’s been stored.

“I’m cautiously optimistic,” Gensler said. “I can write down scenarios where everything dries up. But I don’t think that will happen.”

Socorro County Commissioner Glen Duggins, who is also a member of the Middle Rio Grande Conservancy District, believes some relief may be on the way.

“They are expecting a more active monsoon season than normal in the middle valley,” Duggins told the Socorro County Board of Commissioners on Tuesday.

Socorro County Fire Marshal Mark Mercer said he’s heard the opposite.

“I’ve heard there may not be a monsoon season,” Mercer told the commissioners.

Moore just hopes a dry period like the one this year doesn’t become a trend.

“If we have another year like this next year, we could be in trouble,” Moore said.

Duggins, also a farmer, agrees. “Plant your seeds, love your kids and everything will be all right,” Duggins said.