

Permaculture In Practice: 'Damriddle' planned for Gila River

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By **Nate Downey**
For **The New Mexican**

I pondered, Googled and even Facebooked it, but no synonyms for *boondoggle* exist. In the interest of our language and its blessed diversity, herein I hereby coin the first synonym for *boondoggle*.

The New Mexico Interstate Stream Commission's plan to spend \$1 billion to \$2 billion removing 12,000 acre-feet of water annually from the Gila River, moving it around mountainsides, storing it in three evaporation-prone reservoirs, and delivering it to the 15,000 people in Deming, is a "damriddle" waiting to happen.

Although the term is derived from the aforementioned boondoggle, "damriddle" does not have to be used in the context of a dam project that threatens New Mexico's last wild river. From now on, damriddle can refer to any puzzling waste of money and precious time.

Technically, all the commission did last November was tell the U.S. Department of the Interior that it hopes to do something with water that it could legally access based on the federal Arizona Water Settlements Act. "Hey," the commission was saying, "we want that \$66 million of federally earmarked dollars." In the high-



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stakes, real-life strategy of water in the West, I understand the desire to keep chips on tables, but the problem is that the project is a loser.

First, it's too expensive for the amount of water that might be acquired. Although the commission says its project will cost \$775 million, the former head of the commission has done some math. At www.protectthegila.org, Norm Guame explains that it's more likely to cost above \$1.1 billion.

“How sound are those numbers?” I asked Steve Harris, the executive director of Rio Grande Restoration.

“Remember the Buckman Diversion, Albuquerque's drinking water project and the Navajo Reservoir?” Harris replied. “That's three recent New Mexico water projects that went two to two-and-a-half times over budget.” Making matters worse, Harris continued, “The water we'd take would have to be paid back in cash to the tribes in Arizona who we'd be taking it from.”

The project is wrong on many ethical levels, too. It's not only wrong to take water from indigenous people, but it's also wrong to destroy a wild river, to kill endangered species, to ruin a healthy tourist and recreation industry, and to depress property values in an area that depends on natural beauty and the pristine wilderness that Aldo Leopold established as our nation's first official Wilderness Area. And it's wrong to develop major projects in the most remote parts of our watersheds. These places represent permaculture's Zone 5, where the only thing that humans should harvest is information.

Forget that water-project estimates could easily double over time. Using Guame's numbers translates to \$178,000 per Deming household. That's expensive water, *qué no?* Is the commission thinking in terms of Las Cruces? With \$1.1 billion, every housing unit in that city could buy a \$25,000 cistern system. Now we're talking serious, long-term job-creation.

It's time to contact Gov. Susana Martinez and ask her to consider her fiscal and ethical responsibilities. She could tell the Interstate Stream Commission to stop this damriddle. Will she?

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