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House passes bill that includes expanding Abiquiú reservoir

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Loretta Pacheco King of Santa Fe puts a towel around her 3-year-old granddaughter, Sophia Martinez, at Abiquiú Lake after an afternoon thunderstorm Friday. She said she and her family spent the day at the lake, playing in the water and having a picnic. When the storm came, they took shelter under tents.

Olivia Harlow/The New Mexican

Under a bill that just passed the U.S. House of Representatives, Abiquiú Lake could store a greater volume of water from a wider range of sources, benefiting the environment, outdoor recreation and water management in a changing climate, proponents say.

U.S. Rep. Ben Ray Luján, D-N.M., added a provision in a water resources development bill that would increase the reservoir's storage capacity by 30,000 acre-feet, raising the lake's permissible water level by roughly 10 feet. An acre-foot is about 326,000 gallons.

The reservoir now is permitted to store only what's known as San Juan-Chama water, which originates in the Colorado River. That water is diverted through tunnels across the Continental Divide and then carried along the Chama River through the Heron and El Vado dam systems on its way to Abiquiú.

This reservoir is not allowed to hold "native water" that originates in the Rio Grande Basin as rain and melting snow that drains into the Chama River. The new provision would let this water be added to the reservoir to increase the water source for the city of Santa Fe and other entities.

The change would free the regional water authority and other parties from antiquated restrictions at a time when shorter spring snowmelt periods and more frequent droughts brought on by climate change call for more flexible water management, said Paul Tashjian, director of freshwater at Audubon New Mexico.



Jesse Algudo, 12, of Albuquerque, fishes for trout and bass at Abiquiú Lake on Friday, July 31. It was his first time visiting the reservoir. Olivia Harlow/The New Mexican

"The rules that are embedded in these things were developed 30, 40, 50 years ago and may not make sense now," Tashjian said. "The greater flexibility there is, the more adaptive we can be."

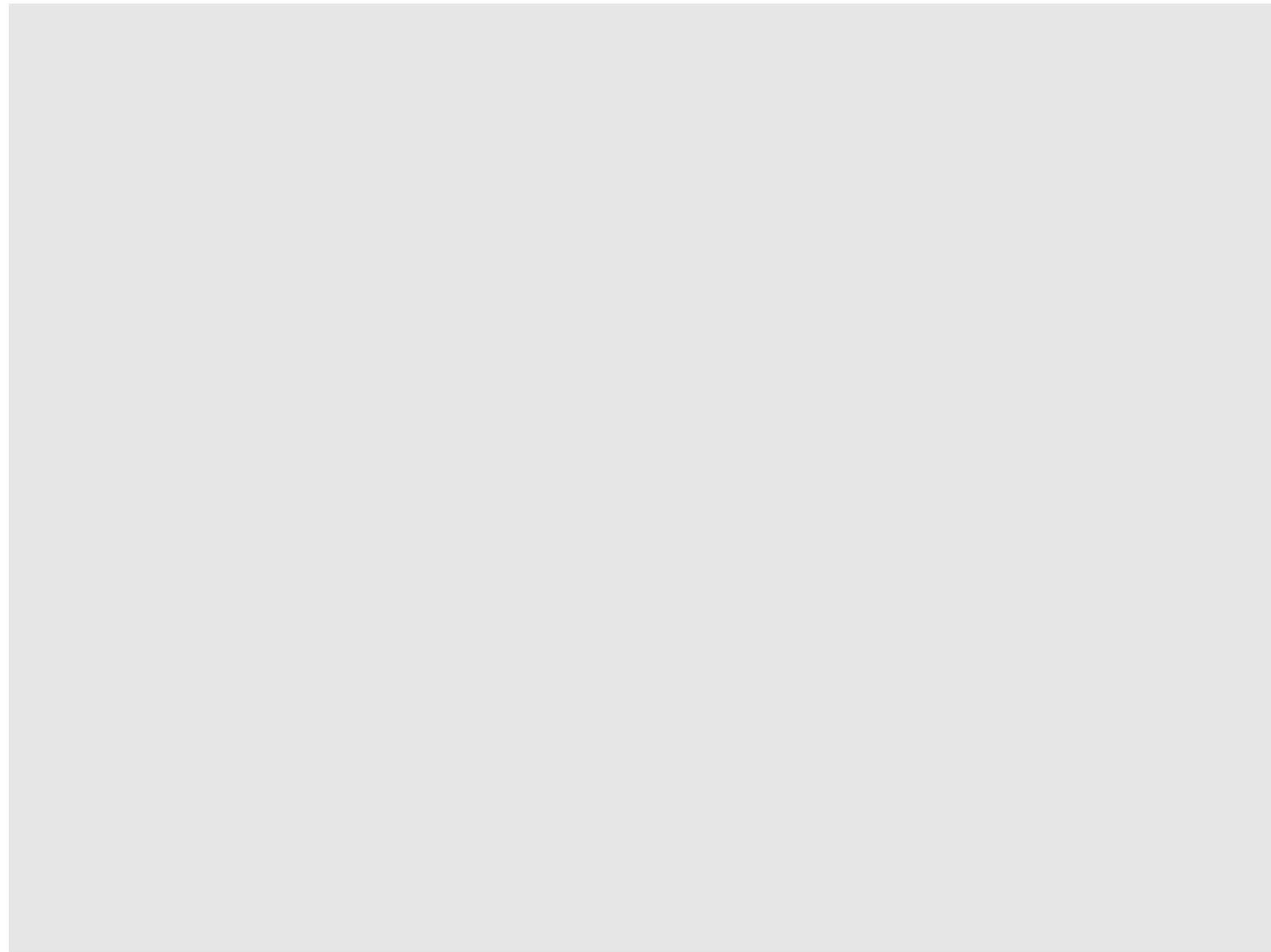
The House passing the bill, which seeks nationwide water improvements, is the first step.

The Senate has its own water resources bill. Representatives from both chambers must sit down and hammer out a version they can agree on.

Tashjian thinks the Abiquiú Lake provision should be safe because it's a regulatory change that won't require federal funding.

Any water pegged as coming from the Rio Grande Basin is released, no matter how low the reservoir is, so being able to store it there would be important, said Ryan Gronewold, chief of water resources planning at the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' Albuquerque office.

"There's a larger volume of that," Gronewold said of the Rio Grande Basin water.



Jeff Williams, of Los Alamos, left, helps Bill Schleyer, of Albuquerque, wrap up Schleyer's sailboat after an afternoon sailing at Abiquiu Lake on Friday, July 31. It was Williams' second time sailing. Schleyer said he first started the activity when he was 15. Olivia Harlow/The New Mexican

Raising the water by 10 feet or so will cause more of it to spill onto shoreline properties and, in turn, require easements from the owners, Gronewold said.

The Army Corps oversees the Abiquiú Dam and reservoir.

The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation runs the Heron and El Vado reservoirs, which the agency uses to supply water to Santa Fe and other contractors, Gronewold said.

Rio Grande water is now only stored at the El Vado reservoir. The El Vado Dam is about to undergo \$16.7 million in repairs, so much of the reservoir's water will need to be funneled elsewhere during the work.

Being able to store the Rio Grande Basin water at Abiquiú during the repairs would be helpful, said Mary Carlson, a spokeswoman for the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation.

“We are watching closely with interest,” Carlson said of the House water resources bill.

The push to loosen Abiquiú Lake's water storage restrictions began several years ago. Water contractors, public officials and environmental groups wrote letters to the Albuquerque Bernalillo County Water Utility Authority, applauding its effort to change the law.

Most everyone involved agreed that increasing water storage will offer greater flexibility, whether it's having more water on hand during droughts or setting aside a pool to enhance wildlife habitat.

A larger volume of stored water will enable authorities to release it when necessary for the health of the river and fish runs, which now can vary because of climate change affecting snowmelts and water levels, Tashjian said.

It also ensures that farmers always have ample water for irrigation, he said.

“If it helps keep the irrigation whole, it helps keep the river whole,” Tashjian said.

And a fuller reservoir will be better for boaters, anglers and anyone else who comes out to enjoy the water, Gronewold said.

“Having more water there is more beneficial,” he said.

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Reporter