

## WATER FLOW

Written by By Holly J. Wagner Sun Correspondent  
Friday, 29 July 2022 04:15

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Water is dry. Not the H<sub>2</sub>O molecules, the subject. And the wells. And the mountains. Which brings us back to the subject, which is how to ensure there's enough water to sustain our lives and lifestyles in the future.

Enter the Navajo-Gallup Water Supply Project, a yearlong effort that will provide drinking water to 43 chapters in the eastern Navajo Nation, the southern region of the Jicarilla Apache Nation and Lybrook and, eventually, the city of Gallup. At buildout, the project will provide drinking water to an estimated 250,000 people, based on population projections out to 2040.

The water to feed the project starts as mountain runoff in Colorado, drains through streams to the San Juan River and is piped from there. The multi-agency project consists of 300 miles of

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pipeline, 20 pumping stations and two treatment plants.

About a third of Navajo Nation homes don't have running water, forcing residents to haul water for themselves, their crops and livestock. The NGWSP, which is part of the Navajo Nation Water Rights Settlement with the federal government, will eventually bring water to many of those homes.

The NGWSP has two separate pipeline laterals that will provide water for the entire project: the Cutter Lateral and San Juan Lateral. ("Lateral" is shorthand for a water transmission system.)

It's not exactly making it rain, but the federal Department of the Interior belatedly marked the completion of the Cutter Lateral, a treatment pipeline that has been delivering clean water to more than 1,500 households in 13 Navajo Nation chapters and the southwest area of Jicarilla since October 2021, on June 9. It was finished at the end of 2020 and went through a year of testing before it was declared in service.

The Cutter Lateral takes water from the Cutter Reservoir, which was originally built for the Navajo Indian Irrigation Project, through transmission pipelines and pumping plants to deliver the raw water to the Cutter Lateral Water Treatment Plant for treatment and delivery to the Navajo Chapters Huerfano, Tiistohsikaad (Burnham), Nageezi, Counselor, Ojo Encino, Torreon/Star Lake, Whitehorse Lake, and Pueblo Pintado and the Jicarilla Apache Nation.

The western portion of the project, the San Juan Lateral, is still under construction (visible along Highway 264) but is about halfway finished and is scheduled for completion by 2027. The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation oversees planning, engineering and construction of the project.

## ***WHAT ABOUT GALLUP?***

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Improvements for the city of Gallup are expected in 2029, and it can't be too soon. Delays are already forcing the city to dig two new wells to replace old ones that are drying up. The city has 15 operational wells, of 45 drilled over time.

When the project was authorized, the estimated cost (based on 2007) was \$870 million and project completion was expected in 2024. With long-term inflation and project changes, today "the working cost estimate to complete this project is \$2.029 billion," city engineering consultant Kurt Spolar, of DePauli Engineering, said.

Of course, the city isn't on the hook for all of that. Gallup has invested about \$33 million so far.

"We're probably about halfway done paying for our end of the project, with some legislative changes," Spolar said. Gallup's part of the project is about 71% complete.

NGWSP participants are seeking federal legislation that would close a \$600 million funding gap, cap the city's costs at \$76 million and provide \$15 million to drill interim wells to serve the city until the NGWSP is finished. "We cannot wait 10 more years," Spolar said. "We're in a water crunch."

The biggest part of the legislative request, Spolar said, is tied to permission to use a reservoir that PNM is abandoning with a power plant.

"Incorporating that into the project, and all the infrastructure that goes with it, has caused a delay. [...] We're not expecting surface water until the end of fiscal year 2029. It's probably going to be 2030, realistically, before it's completed," Spolar explained.

When that happens, Gallup will also be a central distribution point for surrounding areas, so local governments need to develop policy for accessing the water.

"The City of Gallup has owned and built the Gallup regional water system," Spolar said. "We're

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going to take delivery from Farmington. When it gets close to Ya-ta-hey, it's going to enter the city of Gallup regional system. From there, the city of Gallup acts as a hub to deliver water to all the Navajo communities around us as well as nearby private property owners or communities. It's becoming a regional issue, how to get access to this water."

The city is also doing a "blending study" and sending sections of existing pipes for testing to make sure they are safe.

"We are trying to make sure the scales on the inside of those pipes don't come off so we don't have Flint, Mich., on our hands," Spolar said.

Congress appropriated funding for the project under the Omnibus Public Land Management Act of 2009 as part of the Navajo Nation San Juan River Basin Water Rights Settlement in New Mexico.

President Joe Biden's bipartisan infrastructure law included \$2.5 billion to implement the Indian Water Rights Settlement Completion Fund which includes \$123 million for fiscal year 2022 for design and construction of the NGWSP. The project was expected to create 650 jobs over its life. Construction started in 2012.

***The next Project Construction Committee meeting will be held from 9 am to 12 pm July 28 at the El Morro Event Center, 210 South Second St. The meeting will be open to the public and available virtually via Microsoft Teams. Contact Sterling Acree at [jacree@usbr.gov](mailto:jacree@usbr.gov) or (505) 324-5004 to access the meeting over the internet.***