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Lawmakers joined Lt. Gov. Diane Denish in the Capitol Rotunda on Wednesday afternoon for a Gila Day celebration, where several speakers stressed the importance of preserving the river and its ecosystem.

Dutch Salmon, director of the Gila Conservation Coalition, began the ceremony by discussing Aldo Leopold's efforts to establish a wilderness area in Southwest New Mexico.

"There used to be six big wilderness areas of 500,000 acres or more in New Mexico" Salmon said. "By 1921, there was just one left."

He compared the situation with the wilderness areas to the state's river systems today.

"I think there's a certain irony that there are six main-stem rivers in New Mexico," Salmon said. "Just as we had six wilderness areas and were left with one, we have just one of our main-stem rivers left in its natural state."

He then introduced Denish, who said Gov. Richardson has made water one of his top priorities for the legislative session, and said he named 2007 "The Year of Water."

"In making his announcement, the governor said 'The Year of Water' isn't a one-time project," Denish said. "It is an opportunity to make tremendous progress toward a sustainable water future for New Mexico, our economy, our citizens and the health of our rivers."

According to Denish, Richardson included \$7.5 million in his legislative agenda to restore and protect New Mexico waterways.

"We're all here today to celebrate the Gila River, one of the largest desert rivers in the world," Denish said. "The Gila is also the last river in the state that is still free-flowing, and it deserves protection."

She said the river has for centuries sustained life along its banks.

"It has been the lifeblood of Native American peoples from New Mexico to Arizona," Denish said, and "a lifeline for the Spanish settlers."

She told the audience that the river is now a popular tourist destination for anglers, hikers, campers and families.

"I don't want our grandchildren to be at the dry banks of what was once the mighty Gila River decades from now trying to figure out how to restore this state treasure back to its natural state," Denish said. "By then it will be too late."

Denish then discussed the Arizona Water Settlements Act and the Gila amendment that provides New Mexico up to 14,000 acre-feet per year of Gila and San Francisco water.

“Our administration, through the Interstate Stream Commission, recognizes that the 2004 Arizona Water Settlements Act, as it applies to the Gila and San Francisco rivers, must be in full compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act, as well as the Endangered Species Act’s requirements for protection of critical habitat and recovery for every listed species,” she said.

According to Denish, the Richardson administration is committed to responsible stewardship of the Gila.

“In short, we will protect the state’s rivers and endangered species; we will help local governments in southwestern New Mexico provide for their citizens’ long-term water needs,” she said. “These practical ideals are non-negotiable and achievable.”

Ron Curry, New Mexico Environment Department secretary, also advocated protection of the Gila.

“Want to start by saying the lieutenant governor and I come from the southeast part of the state, and many of you know what water is like in the southeast part,” he said. “So, we appreciate the southwest part even more.”

According to Curry, his department will continue to fund research into rivers throughout the state, including the Gila.

“We have to look at this river like most rivers,” he said. “The effect the river has is not just there in the one spot where the river flows.”

Curry also stressed the role his department has played in educating the public about the environment. He said education outreach programs had been taken to classrooms throughout the Grant County area.

“Through leadership of the lieutenant governor and governor,” Curry said, “we want to take educational dollars into the schools to help people understand not just the environment, but also the Gila.”

Bruce Thompson, director of the New Mexico Game and Fish Department, discussed the Gila’s ecology.

“Although natural diversity and species richness have diminished in most other regions of the American Southwest, the Gila River Basin in New Mexico remains largely intact biologically,” he said. “The number of bird, mammal, and reptile species found among the Gila’s diverse mixed-conifer forests, desert grasslands, and sycamore-willow riparian corridors is unparalleled in New Mexico and many other parts of the U.S.”

Thompson said the Gila River Basin is essential habitat for amphibians and reptiles, such as the Chiricahua leopard frog and narrow-headed garter snake. He said many species have been protected in the basin because very little development has occurred, but said some have become extinct and others are now threatened.

“Habitat modification and reduction occurs because of elevated sediment loads, road construction, residential development, and water withdrawals,” Thompson said. “Possible additional water withdrawals from the Gila and San Francisco rivers under terms of the Arizona Indian Water Rights Settlement Act and its Consumptive Use and Forbearance Agreement pose new and significant challenges for Gila Basin species, particularly those dependent on free-flowing rivers and their riparian corridors.”

Danielle Vick, Gila program manager for the Interstate Stream Commission, discussed the impact of the Gila from a generational standpoint.

“There is an old Iroquois proverb that states: ‘In every deliberation we must consider the impact on the seventh generation,’” she said. “With the opportunity given to New Mexico with the Arizona Water Settlements Act, we have a chance to put that adage into our reality.”

She said the ISC, along with Gov. Richardson’s office, have implemented a three-point policy to guide the planning process for the Gila and San Francisco rivers.

“One, we recognize the unique and valuable ecology of Gila Basin, and then we apply the best available science to assess ecological impacts,” Vick said. “Third, we consider historic uses of and future demands of water.”

She said all decisions about the Gila will be guided by the best science available.

“This policy effectively guides us to first and foremost protect the river and the culture of the region,” Vick said. “Only once we’ve achieved those things can we begin to consider future demands.”

State Rep. Mimi Stewart, a member of the interim water committee, said she had toured the Gila and took members of her committee to do the same.

“I think at least part of them understood the significance of the Gila being in its natural state,” she said. “Even though I live in Albuquerque, I join you in wanting to protect the Gila.”

The Gila Day celebration was sponsored by the Gila Conservation Coalition and other regional and state conservation groups. For more information, visit www.gilaconservation.org.

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