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Gila River Listed as One of 10 'Most Endangered'

BY RENE ROMO
JOURNAL SOUTHERN BUREAU

LAS CRUCES— The Gila River, the last free-flowing river in the state, was named Thursday as one of the 10 “most endangered” rivers in the country for 2008 by the conservancy group American Rivers.

Gov. Bill Richardson told The Associated Press he will consider proposing a statutory protection for the river in southwest New Mexico to block construction of dams or water diversion projects that environmentalists say would impair a valuable natural resource.

Washington-based American Rivers says the key threat to the Gila, which cuts through parts of New Mexico and Arizona, is posed by provisions of the Arizona Water Settlements Act of 2004. The act authorized up to \$128 million for New Mexico to build any project to meet its future water needs.

Under the act, New Mexico could tap \$66 million in federal funds, starting in 2014, for any water-related purpose, but up to \$128 million total if the state chooses to build a water diversion project that would divert up to 14,000 acre-feet.

Todd Schulke, a Silver City-based policy adviser for the Center for Biological Diversity, said Thursday that some residents of Grant and Catron counties, along with members of the Interstate Stream Commission, have proposed a project to divert up to 14,000 acre-feet of water annually from the Gila River and its tributary, the San Francisco River.

Such a project would require a huge pumping station, a power station, a pipeline or canal system, and an off-stream dam or reservoir that would cost far in excess of the money now currently valuable.

More to the point, Schulke said, the project is not needed to meet current water demands, would fuel tremendous growth, and would impair flows and natural habitat.

Schulke said the ISC is “pushing for a diversion anywhere and at any cost.”

“The great irony of the proposed Gila River diversion is that it’s a water development looking for a need,” he said.

In June, Richardson vetoed an appropriation of \$945,000 earmarked for “Gila basin water development” because, he said,

in a statement, “It appeared to presuppose that the funds would be used solely to support a diversion or dam project.”

He directed the ISC to study a range of alternatives “with the ‘no-diversion’ option as an essential part of the analysis.”

On Thursday, Estevan Lopez, Interstate Stream Commission director, disputed that his agency is pursuing a water diversion project.

“It (the Gila River) is a unique ecology, and we believe it needs to be protected,” he said.

But Lopez said the new planning process that began in the fall takes into account the fact some New Mexicans want to see a diversion project built. And he said it is prudent to undertake a study on the impact on the river of a 14,000 acre-foot diversion.