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Think Progress

Drought-Stricken New Mexico Farmers Drain Aquifer To Sell Water For Fracking

BY [JOE ROMM](#) AUGUST 5, 2013 AT 5:48 PM UPDATED: AUGUST 5, 2013 AT 6:09 PM

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U.S. Drought Monitor New Mexico

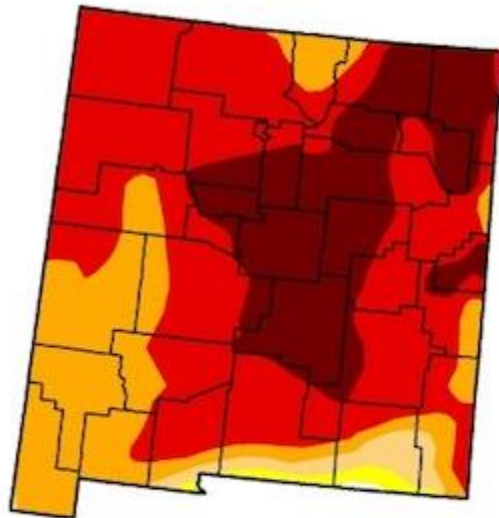
July 30, 2013
Valid 7 a.m. EST

Drought Conditions (Percent Area)

	None	D0-D4	D1-D4	D2-D4	D3-D4	D4
Current	0.14	99.86	98.49	95.50	73.55	24.84
Last Week (07/23/2013 map)	0.00	100.00	100.00	97.29	80.07	35.14
3 Months Ago (04/30/2013 map)	0.00	100.00	99.04	97.75	81.82	24.89
Start of Calendar Year (01/01/2013 map)	0.00	100.00	98.83	94.05	31.88	0.97
Start of Water Year (09/25/2012 map)	0.00	100.00	100.00	62.56	12.25	0.66
One Year Ago (07/24/2012 map)	0.00	100.00	99.94	78.04	23.92	0.00

Intensity:

- D0 Abnormally Dry
- D1 Drought - Moderate
- D2 Drought - Severe
- D3 Drought - Extreme
- D4 Drought - Exceptional



The Drought Monitor focuses on broad-scale conditions. Local conditions may vary. See accompanying text summary for forecast statements.

<http://droughtmonitor.unl.edu>



Released Thursday, August 1, 2013
Brian Fuchs, National Drought Mitigation Center

The bad news is that the terrible drought in New Mexico has led some farmers to sell their water to the oil and gas industry. The worse news is that many of them are actually pumping the water out of the aquifer to do so.

The worst news of all is that once the frackers get through tainting it with their witches' brew of chemicals, that water often becomes unrecoverable — and then we have the possibility the used fracking water will end up contaminating even more of the groundwater.

The Albuquerque Journal reports:

With a scant agriculture water supply due to the prolonged drought, some farmers in Eddy County with supplemental wells are keeping bill collectors at bay by selling their water to the booming oil and gas industry.

The industry needs the water for hydraulic fracturing, known as fracking, the drilling technique that has been used for decades to blast huge volumes of water, fine sands and chemicals into the ground to crack open valuable shale formations.

You may wonder why farmers would sell water to frackers when some 95% of the state has been under severe drought conditions for the entire year. The short answer is it pays the bills. Here's the longer answer:

In recent months, more legal notices have been appearing in the Current-Argus informing the public that a water-right holder with a supplemental well has submitted an application to the state engineer's office seeking to change the purpose of use from agriculture to commercial, or transferring the right from one location to another.

"A lot of folks are doing that," said New Mexico Interstate Stream Commissioner Jim Wilcox, an Otis resident and president of the Otis Mutual Domestic Water Association. "I can't blame them. The Carlsbad Irrigation District doesn't have the water the farmers need, and our farmers have to have some income coming in."

Wilcox said farmers in the Carlsbad Irrigation District can't sell their primary water source they receive via the irrigation system because the CID is a government project. However, if they have a supplemental well, they can apply for a change of use permit that gives them the right to sell their well water for commercial use.

Yes, the New Mexico Interstate Stream Commissioner can't blame farmers for an ultimately self-destructive practice that can't possibly be sustained. Perhaps he should read Thomas Jefferson's "brilliant statement of intergenerational equity principles."

Wilcox fully understands what it means to pump an unreplenishing aquifer during a drought:

“Farmers right now are having to pump their supplemental wells, and we understand that. It’s their livelihood,” he said. “But **the supplemental wells are drawing from the same water table we provide potable water to our customers (from).**”

“The oil and gas industry is requiring a lot of water and our concern is the effect it’s having on our aquifer,” he added. “**We are concerned about losing water that can’t be recovered.** Hopefully, we will get through this drought and everyone will be intact.”

While this drought will likely end at some point, climate change means droughts in the southwest are going to get longer, drier, and hotter. If we don’t reverse emissions trends very soon, the entire region is headed towards permanent Dust Bowl conditions.

The oil and gas industry apparently doesn’t care whether it helps destroy the entire water supply of New Mexico — as long as the groundwater supply lasts until they finish fracking the state. You’d think state officials would see the value for farmers and residents in sustainable water consumption given where the climate is headed.

Tragically, fracked water can be worse than unrecoverable. It can poison groundwater when reinjection wells fail, which they are prone to do as Propublica explained in their exposé in Scientific American, “Are Fracking Wastewater Wells Poisoning the Ground beneath Our Feet?” As that article pointed out:

“In 10 to 100 years we are going to find out that most of our groundwater is polluted,” said Mario Salazar, an engineer who worked for 25 years as a technical expert with the EPA’s underground injection program in Washington. “A lot of people are going to get sick, and a lot of people may die.”

The Albuquerque Journal quotes one local man, Jim Davis:

“In some areas, we are over-appropriating. We are in a drought and the water table has dropped drastically and there is no recharge,” he said. “There are some people who have legal water rights and they are over-pumping. The public doesn’t know about it. **As private individuals, we have to raise Cain about it.**

... “Black River is at its lowest level ever. It’s lower than it was in the 1950s when we had a long drought. I make my living from selling water, but at the same time, I think it is important to protect our precious water supply.”

Davis has been “selling water commercially from his wells in Black River for about seven years”!
But now things have gone too far even for him.

After Cain murdered Abel, God asked him where his brother was. Cain famously replied, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” As Answers.com puts it, “Cain’s words have come to symbolize people’s unwillingness to accept responsibility for the welfare of their fellows — their ‘brothers’ in the extended sense of the term. The tradition of Judaism and Christianity is that people do have this responsibility.” Seriously.