

# Protect New Mexico's Water



Climate change threatens New Mexico's water security, and New Mexico's policymakers are complicit in allowing Big Agribusiness to prioritize profit over people. Specifically, wasteful mega-dairies, alfalfa production, and pecan trees guzzle water across the state, draining residential wells and state aquifers. New Mexico doesn't collect adequate data to track how much water there is and how much these industrial agriculture operations are using. The state is not prepared to face the ongoing drought. A meaningful change in how New Mexico allocates and legislates water is desperately needed, and Governor Lujan Grisham and the New Mexico Legislature must take immediate action to address the scale of this emergency. **It is beyond time to Protect New Mexico's Water!**

## **Governor Lujan Grisham: Protect New Mexico's Water Now!**

### ***Big Agribusinesses Use Exorbitant Amounts of Water***

Big Ag is New Mexico's largest abuser of water, consuming more than 80 percent of the state's fresh water. We need a strong agricultural sector to provide food for daily needs, but much of New Mexico's water goes to water-intensive industrial agriculture that is not suited to our climate and does not directly feed people. Alfalfa, for example, is one of the most egregious water users, largely used to provide feed for animals confined in factory farms.

An estimated total of 85 billion gallons was used to irrigate New Mexico's alfalfa in 2021. This is enough to supply 2.9 million people with household water for a year, 800,000 more people than live in the entire state of New Mexico. Over 30 percent of New Mexico's alfalfa leaves the state or even the country, supporting dairies in dry climates like Saudi Arabia, where alfalfa production was banned to save water.

The alfalfa that does stay in the state is used to support New Mexico's mega-dairies, which pose their own environmental and community hazards. Food & Water Watch estimates that it takes 32 million gallons of water a day to maintain the dairy cows on New Mexico's factory farms. The state is now home to some of the largest herd sizes in the country,

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averaging over 3,000 cows. These mega-dairies pose monstrous waste problems, creating 11 times as much sewage daily as is produced by the Albuquerque metropolitan area.

Other water-intensive crops continue to receive huge water allocations in New Mexico, despite the ongoing drought. Thirsty pecans, for example, guzzled an estimated 93 billion gallons of water in 2021. This could supply 3.2 million people's homes with water — over 1 million more than live in New Mexico. But in the face of prolonged drought, the state's pecan acreage expanded by 34 percent in the past two decades, putting increased water stress on already vulnerable areas.

### ***Lack of Data and Funding Threatens Water Security***

In the face of an historic drought, New Mexico's government fails to collect data to know where and how many wells are running dry, or how much water is used in each sector. Because there is no centralized agency that collects this basic data, New Mexico is left with a patchwork system of water knowledge. Rural and tribal communities feel this failure the hardest, with dry wells concentrated disproportionately in rural areas. Without adequate record-keeping, shortages and dry wells come without warning for low-resource communities, leaving families forced to shell out thousands for new wells or water purchases.

In recent years, this issue has been highlighted numerous times by government agencies, but legislative action has been lackluster. New Mexico passed the Water Data Act in 2019, which directs agencies to collaborate on identifying and repairing gaps in water data. The law was a first of its kind, but it was in trouble from the start because the legislature and the governor did not provide nearly enough funding to meet the goals of the Act. Many of the directives in the Act continue to be underfunded and, therefore, unfulfilled.

As this struggle continues, New Mexico water law shields Big Ag from reducing its water use during the drought. Because of prior appropriation, senior water rights holders get the most water during times of shortages, while junior rights holders may receive nothing at all. In New Mexico, senior water users are typically in the agricultural sector, and junior users are municipalities and residential users — meaning that in times of drought, Big Ag is prioritized over towns and household water use for New Mexicans. This same system also encourages industrial agricultural users to use all their water allocations — a principle known as “use it or lose it.” If they don't use it all, users will lose their rights to that water in the future. This leads to enormous amounts of wasted water in a time when New Mexico cannot afford to waste even one drop.

### **Time for Bold Leadership From Governor Lujan Grisham**

As climate change accelerates, the state will only get drier. We cannot afford business as usual. We need bold action from Governor Lujan Grisham to restructure how water is allocated in New Mexico and crack down on Big Ag's egregious overuse. Access to water for basic needs is a human right, and water must be managed in the public interest.

### ***Governor Lujan Grisham must take bold action to rein in these water abuses and protect New Mexico's water. This means directing state agencies to:***

- Update existing drought plans to include response actions specific to mega-dairy and alfalfa water overuse,
- Deny water permit applications for new and expanding mega-dairies and alfalfa production,
- Work with the state legislature to properly fund the Water Data Act to address data gaps, and
- Prioritize residential and drinking water over mega-dairy and alfalfa water use.