EDITORIAL: An appointment that matters

EDIT ORIAL: An appointment that matters

Oct 06, 2011 (The Santa Fe New Mexican - McClatchy-Tribune Information Services via COMTEX) -- For almost nine years, John D'Antonio, New Mexico's state engineer, has balanced competing interests with grace and intelligence as he led up the office that oversees the West's most essential resource -- water.

For 10 months, Gov. Susana Martinez let D'Antonio dangle in the job. She didn't replace him outright, and she didn't fire him -- still he served on. He ended up as one of 20-plus candidates she was considering for the job on a permanent basis. Now the governor must act. D'Antonio has resigned and will return to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, where he will be deputy district engineer for programs and project management with the Albuquerque office.

His departure leaves a big job to fill.

Consider the scope of the job: The state engineer manages a $51 million budget (from federal, state general fund and state special revenue funds) and oversees 275 full-time employees. Consider the duties of the office: It is where an individual goes to file a permit to dig a well, where acequias register and maintain vigil over their water rights and where large interests collide.

With only a third of the claims to water in New Mexico adjudicated -- decided in a court of law -- much is at stake with the appointment of the next state engineer. Ditch users north and south, of course, want an engineer sympathetic to and understanding of their irrigation rights, some of the oldest in the state. Tribal water claimants -- possessing even older rights -- need a state engineer who will not value development over their needs, for example, and who will ensure that recent settlements are carried out. The engineer must balance the downstream users against the desires of the users upstream. There are the conflicts between urban dwellers and rural users, between a home-owner who wants to drill a well and the nearby ranches or acequias that share a stream or aquifer. The office has authority in managing the interstate water compacts, a complicated matter that is never far from a courtroom.

So many conflicts, all filtering through one office.

Still to be decided are court challenges to many of the decisions D'Antonio made during his tenure -- in tribal water rights cases, the issuing of domestic well permits, even how much authority the state engineer has over water management during a drought.

This appointment is one of Gov. Martinez's most important. That it lingered so long is a shame, because the state's water boss cannot be seen to be on interim status -- too many decisions flow from that office. An appointment, says the Governor's Office, is expected in the next 30 days. Little else she has done this year will be so eagerly anticipated.

(c)2011 The Santa Fe New Mexican (Santa Fe, N.M.) Visit The Santa Fe New Mexican (Santa Fe, N.M.) at www.santafenewmexican.com Distributed by MCTInformation Services

Copyright (C) 2011, The Santa Fe New Mexican