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Two bills to restore clean water protections, safeguard drinking water pass first committee

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Today, the Senate Conservation Committee voted 6-3 to pass SB 21 and SB 22, a pair of bills that will provide critical protections for New Mexico waters. The bills are also assigned to the Senate Judiciary and Finance Committees before they move over to the House and then proceed to a floor vote.

Following rollbacks to federal clean water protections in recent years, up to 95% of New Mexico's waters have lost protection once provided under the Clean Water Act. Because of these rollbacks and the lack of a state water quality permitting system, American Rivers named **all** New Mexico rivers atop its list of the [most endangered rivers in the country](#) in its [2024 Most Endangered Rivers report](#).

The bills that passed committee today would ensure federal clean water protections that had existed in New Mexico for decades are continued at the state level. In addition, they will provide authority to the state to take over permitting from the federal government for the waters that are still federally protected, streamlining the process and bringing oversight into the hands of New Mexicans.

Senate Majority Leader Peter Wirth and Rep. Kristina Ortez sponsored [SB 22](#)—a bill to establish a state-level permitting system for waters no longer federally protected under the Clean Water Act—and [SB 21](#)—a bill to assume state permitting authority for waters currently managed by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency— to set in place the necessary authority to build a comprehensive state permitting program.

“New Mexico waters have lost critical protections in recent years, threatening our drinking water, the health of our communities, and the future of key industries like agriculture and outdoor recreation,” said **Rachel Conn, deputy director of Amigos Bravos**. “We’re pleased to see the progression of SB 21 and SB 22 that would reinstate decades of prior protections and establish a system to ensure the wetlands and waterways we need for our way of life don’t become contaminated.”

“Our land-based communities depend on clean water in our streams, headwaters, and wetlands to irrigate our fields and care for our livestock,” said **Paula Garcia, executive director of the**

New Mexico Acequia Association. “A state-based permitting system will help protect our acequias and farms for the future.”

“These bills will form a complete surface water permitting program for the state of New Mexico. These protections are critical to ensure our most precious resource is protected for future generations,” said **Tricia Snyder, Rivers and Waters Program director for New Mexico Wild.** “We’re grateful this important effort is making forward movement in the legislature.”

“Nuevo Mexico must now step up. Urgent action is required. The legislature must adopt protections and programs to safeguard our waterways from pollution,” said **Jared Berenice Estrada with The Semilla Project.** “These waterways demand our immediate protection for the sake of future generations.”

“With much of the Mimbres and Gila Watersheds at risk due to loss of recent clean water protections, a state permitting program to protect our waters from pollution is needed,” said **Allyson Siwik, executive director of the Gila Resources Information Project.**

“New Mexico’s most precious resources are our streams, lakes, and wetlands. But this scarce resource is under singular attack,” said **Tannis Fox, senior attorney with Western Environmental Law Center.** “These two bills will establish the necessary framework to protect our waters from pollution, and protect New Mexico’s communities, Tribal waters, acequias, wildlife habitat, and outdoor recreation economy now and for the future.”

“Valuing water and valuing life are one and the same,” said **Rev. Clara Sims, assistant executive director of New Mexico & El Paso Interfaith Power and Light.** “In the absence of federal protections, our state leaders have an urgent and sacred responsibility to protect our precious waterways of New Mexico for the thriving of all our communities of life, human and beyond, for all generations to come.”

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