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**Water Quality Control Commission Adopts Petition that Protects Headwater Streams in
Wilderness Areas of New Mexico**

Designation Will Protect State's Waters from Future Degradation

(Santa Fe, NM) – The state Water Quality Control Commission by a vote of seven to three adopted a rule this week that requires the State of New Mexico to protect the state's headwater streams in federally designated wilderness areas.

The state's Outstanding National Resource Waters or "ONRW" proposal will into effect Dec. 30.

"These waters represent some of our most valuable waters for drinking, for ecological value, and for recreational value," Governor Bill Richardson said. "The designation will protect these waters for current and future generations in New Mexico."

"I am proud of this effort because our arid state deserves special protections for our precious rivers and streams," said New Mexico Environment Department Secretary Ron Curry. "We have worked on this proposal for more than two years and appreciate the broad support for our petition from municipalities, tribes and pueblos, non-profit organizations, and water associations throughout the state."

The rule as passed exempts existing grazing practices and acequia maintenance and repair from the designation, which protects cattle growers' and acequia associations' interests.

The commission did not adopt a proposed expansion of the state's petition presented by Amigos Bravos and Wild Earth Guardians that would have designated all streams, whether or not perennial (i.e., those that flow year-round). The Commission also declined to adopt Wild Earth Guardians' request to protect waters in adjacent roadless areas in Forest Service Wilderness areas.

In a related measure, the WQCC adopted a negotiated proposal on antidegradation and its associated guidance and procedures documents.

In order to maximize public participation in the ONRW proposal, the state agencies engaged in an extensive two-year public outreach effort, which included drafting three proposals for which public comment was accepted and considered; holding 21 meetings around the state in areas potentially affected; and developing master mail and email lists of hundreds of interested persons to inform the public about the ONRW proposals.

The ONRW outreach effort was the most extensive public participation effort on a water quality initiative undertaken by the state.

Governor Bill Richardson on Earth Day in 2008 announced the state's intention to seek ONRW designation for surface waters within the Forest Service Wilderness. The New Mexico Environment Department took the lead in the petition, assisted by the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish and the New Mexico Energy, Minerals and Natural Resources Department. The three state agencies filed a petition with the Commission in February of this year nominating all perennial surface waters in Forest Service Wilderness as ONRWs.

ONRW status is authorized under the state Water Quality Act and the federal Clean Water Act. The designation will protect approximately 700 miles of 195 perennial rivers and streams, 29 lakes, and approximately 4,930 acres of 1,405 wetlands in 12 Wilderness areas. These waters represent the State's most valuable headwater streams. Protection of these headwaters will help maintain a clean water supply for uses in Wilderness and for downstream uses by municipalities, agriculture, and recreational interests, and will help maintain healthy ecosystems, preserve habitat, and protect vulnerable and endangered species.

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