

and furthermore, from the desk of the dean



Dean Jerry G. Schickedanz

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## Channeling our water expertise

“Life is what happens while you’re busy making other plans.” This quotation from pop star John Lennon applies to our College of Agriculture and Home Economics. As we were busy making plans for new departments, new programs and new initiatives, water programs are what happened.

Over most of the past century, we never had a “department of water” or an overarching water initiative in the college. But concern about water seeped into everything that we did. It shaped our research agenda; how we bred and cultivated plants; how we bred and grazed cattle; how we developed natural resource management programs; how we developed agricultural science centers; and, of course, how we developed classroom and Extension curricula we taught in all these arenas.

We were surprised to be reproached by casual observers for not addressing water issues, but that is the price for not pulling great ideas out of the sky and spreading great programs across our college, neatly wrapping them together in a well-labeled package. We started to address that oversight by naming our state-of-the-art science facility, opened in 2000, the Center for Sustainable Development of Arid Lands. The center still stands, though it was renamed for Joe and Mary Skeen.

The center served as an affirmation of NMSU as the oasis of desert science, based on our long record of work in this water-challenged region. We were located in a region with 8 inches of annual rainfall. We had 400 square miles of experimental rangeland near campus with a Long-Term Ecological Research study, the Desert Biome Study and the world-renowned Desert Project soil study. NMSU was a member of the International Arid Lands Consortium and home to the Plant Genetics Consortium for Desert Adaptation.

Our science center near Farmington guided irrigated agriculture from its infancy in a barren desert region, bringing crop agriculture in San Juan County from nowhere to ranking fourth among our 33 counties.

In the last few years, we won funding with the aid of the center’s namesake, Joe Skeen, for the Rio Grande Basin Initiative that has focused our efforts to conserve precious water resources in our state and Texas. The initiative has been much of the glue for our young Water Task Force, which has brought together some 75 NMSU scientists from inside and outside our college to identify salient research and educational needs relating to water in our state.

Our reputation is growing. NMSU will be a sister institution with national laboratories in a proposed center for water research through legislation authored by U.S. Sen. Pete Domenici. Recently, the Consul-General of the Persian Gulf nation of Qatar invited NMSU to develop a proposal for a branch college of agriculture in his country, based on our record of working in water-starved environments. Other universities there addressing other fields include Cornell, Carnegie Mellon and Texas A&M.

It is time for our college to wrap up our water expertise in a recognizable package. To that end, I am using the Gerald Thomas Chair in Agriculture and Food Systems to galvanize a Center for Excellence in Water. Thomas Schmugge is an internationally recognized scientist in hydrology and remote sensing. It will be his job to meld great ideas with our great scientific capability.

Water issues will be featured in priorities for the university. Our Center for Excellence promises to start the process of NMSU being fully recognized for its great work with the precious commodity of water. **R**