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(505) 984-8950**STEERING AND POLICY COMMITTEE****AT-LARGE WHIP**www.tomudall.house.gov**Congress of the United States**
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-3103**COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS**SUBCOMMITTEE ON
INTERIOR, ENVIRONMENT AND
RELATED AGENCIESSUBCOMMITTEE ON
LABOR, HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES,
EDUCATION AND RELATED AGENCIESSUBCOMMITTEE ON
THE LEGISLATIVE BRANCH**CO-VICE CHAIR**
CONGRESSIONAL
NATIVE AMERICAN CAUCUS

May 18, 2007

Secretary Dirk Kempthorne
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Secretary Kempthorne,

Thank you for your detailed responses to questions I raised during your testimony before the Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior, Environment and Related Agencies. As we discussed, an extensive study led by the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), Sandia National Laboratory, and the State Water Engineers is currently being conducted to determine the amount of potable and recoverable groundwater in the Salt Basin Aquifer that underlies the Otero Mesa. Many people consider the Salt Basin Aquifer to be the largest remaining untapped fresh water supply in the state.

As you may recall, I asked if you could guarantee that the leasing of oil and gas and the issuance of drilling permits in the Otero Mesa region will not impact the water resource prior to the USGS study's completion. Your answer stated that "the BLM is confident that its process to approve plans will protect the aquifer at such time drilling does take place." You did not, however, guarantee the safety of the aquifer's water supply. As such, I respectfully urge you to delay oil and gas leasing or permitting decisions until the USGS study is completed.

As part of its study, the USGS issued a preliminary report which notes the Salt Basin Aquifer could potentially hold a 156-year water supply. In a Southwestern state, where water issues are a constant concern, the potential for an additional safe water supply is of utmost importance. Thank you for your consideration of my request to defer drilling for oil or gas in the Otero Mesa until the USGS issues its report. I look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

Tom Udall
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