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Expert in American water law to study Alberta's water rules as Fulbright Visiting Research Chair at the U of L

The hot, dry summer across western North America was a reminder of the importance of carefully managing the water supply but it's something Reed Benson, a faculty member in the University of New Mexico School of Law, has been aware of since his earliest days growing up on the American plains.

"I have always felt that water was important not just to societies and communities and ecosystems, it was also important to me. I went to law school thinking I could learn something to help me play a role in how water was managed. That's always felt like the best use of my time," he says. "I've spent my career working on issues of water and the environment."

Benson will be spending the fall semester in southern Alberta as he conducts research into water law as the Fulbright Visiting Research Chair in Water and the Environment. He was drawn to the U of L because of its focus on water research and the expertise available here.

"I have always focused on the water challenges of the western United States and there are enough similarities in southern Alberta, both on the water supply and demand side and the legal aspects, that I thought I could learn some relevant lessons here," says Benson.

In the western United States, as in southern Alberta, water was historically allocated without much thought about environmental impacts. Most of the widely available water has already been allocated, largely for irrigation purposes, says Benson. Now, it's better understood that taking too much water out of a river damages aquatic and riparian ecosystems and the challenge is to develop water management practices that take the health of the river into account, along with the needs of society and the economy.

While some similarities exist between water laws in the United States and those in Canada, Benson is particularly interested in how Alberta changes operating plans for water projects like dams and reservoirs in light of changing needs for water, increasing

scientific knowledge, and the expected effects of climate change. In the western U.S., the federal government operates many of the major dams.

“The practice has really been not to revise the operating plans for these reservoirs even though all of those things are changing and they’re not required to revise them,” he says. “It makes a lot of sense to engage the public and stakeholders to talk about how a dam should be operated in the future. In Alberta, there seems to be more willingness to be flexible in looking at some of these same issues.”

Benson will be studying developments in the Oldman and Bow river basins. In addition to collaborating with researchers at the U of L, Benson will also connect with law professors at the University of Calgary and the University of Alberta.

“With the Rockies and the plains, this is a beautiful, interesting part of North America and I am excited to have the chance to spend a few months here,” he says.

Fulbright Canada is a not-for-profit organization with a mandate to identify the best and brightest minds in both the United States and Canada and engage them in academic exchange. Fulbright Canada provides support to students, teachers and independent researchers through a variety of programs, including the Fulbright Visiting Research Chairs Program.

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