

# Climate change and the end of skiing

**T**he ski season is almost over and we've had a good run.

About 70 years so far since some of the earliest ski resorts were founded in Colorado, almost 60 years since our local Taos Ski Valley opened for business. But due to global warming, according to some predictions, there may be no appreciable snowpack left in Northern New Mexico by the middle of this century. It's over.

That is the most dire scenario, but certainly by the end of the century, if the pace of our carbon emissions and global warming do not slow down,

## FOR THE LAND



**ERNIE ATENCIO**

there will be no local snowpack left for us to ski on.

According to the Natural Resources Conservation Service, current snowpack in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains is about 71 percent of average. That may not seem so bad, but that figure is based on a 30-year rolling average — just the thinnest slice of time. It has been a relatively wet few decades, so that average

gives us a very skewed perspective on our long-term climatic history.

Some of the old acequia farmers still talk about the terrible drought of the 1950s. The acequia tradition has been around 400 years — or longer,

considering earlier American Indian irrigation practices — long enough to see big fluctuations in the weather and learn to live with it. But that 1950s drought was severe enough to stick in the memory of someone trying to make a living from the land, the longest and driest spell in over a century. Yet tree rings tell us that the '50s were nothing compared to much drier spells throughout the last 2,000 years.

Add global warming into the mix of an already dry region and we are heading for some huge changes. Hotter and Drier is the name of a 2008 report by the Natural Resources Defense Council and the Rocky Mountain Climate Organization. It concludes that the West is heating

and drying up faster than the rest of the planet.

The Natural Resources Defense Council teamed up with Protect Our Winters for another recent report released last December. This one predicts an average increase of 5 to 6 degrees and the loss of 50 to 75 percent of the winter snowpack in our Sangre de Cristos by the end of the century.

It may not even be cold enough to make snow (not to mention the impact increased snowmaking would have on dwindling water). And the report focuses on the extreme economic impacts this will have.

But we are all optimists at heart and want to believe that God and providence will smile on us — like the

farmers who settled the Great Plains in the late 1800s during an unusually wet period, with faith in the mystical belief that “rain follows the plow.”

We will spend another year watering our Kentucky bluegrass sod and golf courses, using high flow plumbing fixtures, washing the cars and preparing for next ski season.

You would think we know better these days than those settlers on the Great Plains, but I'm not convinced that we do. I'm still looking forward a new pair of ski boots next year.

*Ernie Atencio is a cultural anthropologist, conservationist and outdoor recreationist who runs Land & Culture Consulting. Contact him at [atencio@newmex.com](mailto:atencio@newmex.com).*