

Governor Proposes 49% Increase In Environment Department Funding

A new climate change bureau, a boost in drinking water oversight and an expanded hemp and cannabis agency would be paid for by a hefty funding increase Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham is proposing for the state Environment Department.

In all, the agency would see a 48.7 percent bump in its budget if lawmakers approve it in the 30-day legislative session set to begin Jan. 18.

That's a big if.

The Legislative Finance Committee recommends a 6.4 percent increase in the agency's budget for the 2023 fiscal year.

In a statement, Lujan Grisham said she was proposing the bigger budget to make environmental oversight a priority.

"My administration believes that clean air, clean water, and clean lands are the right of every New Mexican, and I am committed to providing the resources to state agencies to make sure that is the case," Lujan Grisham said.

Cleaning up industry, taking action on climate change and protecting public health can be done while strengthening and diversifying the economy, she added.

The proposal includes:

- \$2.5 million to fund a 15-person climate change bureau that would oversee some proposed laws, if they pass. Those include establishing a new clean fuel standard, making New Mexico a hydrogen hub and codifying the commitment to achieve net-zero emissions by 2050. The bureau also would develop new climate policies.

- \$2.4 million to assure drinking water is safe from contaminants such as PFAS, plus mitigate drought and restore watersheds and wetlands, including those important to the state’s outdoor economy. (PFAS is an abbreviation for perfluoroalkyl and polyfluoroalkyl substances, a group of synthetic, potentially harmful chemicals used in a wide variety of household products and industrial processes.)
- \$2.3 million for 19 jobs within the Hemp and Cannabis Bureau.

A fossil fuel advocate and fierce critic of Lujan Grisham bashed the proposed funding for the climate change bureau and the clean fuel standard it would oversee if enacted into law.

“The newly-created bureaucracy would cost taxpayers more than \$166,000 per employee and be put in charge of implementing the governor’s Clean Fuel Standard Act, which will raise gas prices across the state,” Larry Behrens, director of Power the Future’s Western states chapter, said in a statement. “While New Mexico’s families are currently paying gas prices that are 40 percent higher than last year, the governor’s proposal would increase the cost of gas even more.”

State Environment Department Secretary James Kenney described the proposed budget increase as essential, calling it a “huge step forward.”