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## Beat editor paid for ISC work

Grant County Beat owner/ editor Mary Alice Murphy was paid more than \$ 4,000 by the Interstate Stream Commission in the past two years while still covering the agency's meetings by writing news stories and editorial pieces on her website. According to a list of ISC purchase orders provided to the New Mexico District Court, the ISC paid Murphy \$2,600 on July 24, 2013, and \$1,611 on July 16, 2014, for providing "assistance to the ISC in conducting AWSA/ Gila meetings.' The payments were first reported by Silver City Daily Press columnist Philip Connors.

Murphy has covered the progress of the Arizona Water Settlements Act longer and more extensively than anyone else in the area, but her employment by the Interstate Stream Commission runs afoul of standard journalist ethics, according to Gwyneth Doland, founding member of the board of directors of the Rio Grande Chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists.

"The purpose of journalism is to provide a voice for the public and to be an independent advocate for them, and be a watchdog over the government,' Doland said. "So, there can't be any question where a journalist's loyalties lie. That's why the SPJ Code so clearly states that independence is

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one of the four pillars of our industry. It clearly states we must avoid conflicts of interest, whether real or not.'

According to Lela Hunt, public information officer for the State Engineer's Office, Murphy was employed as a note taker. According to Doland, who has taught ethics for the School of Communication and Journalism at the University of New Mexico, this may affect how readers evaluate Murphy's reporting on the commission.

"She could have watered the plants in their office, but the fact that she was paid money by them means she could never be perceived as an independent member of the media when writing on the subject,' Doland said.

Murphy has also written a number of editorials in support of the controversial diversion projects the ISC has focused on for the last few years.

Murphy declined to comment, other than saying she didn't do anything wrong and does not believe this should be news. She said that several people have already called in with their support. If she chooses to respond, she said, she would be doing so in her own media outlet.

Murphy's ownership of the Grant County Beat is the only thing that kept New Mexico State University journalism professor Roger Mellen from criticizing Murphy's parallel employment and coverage outright.

"Media ethics are voluntary and are not required by law,' he said. "On your own website you could do what you damn well please. It is nearly impossible to hold someone to what we may consider responsible journalism ethics. Normally a



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good reporter would be totally transparent about any connections they might have.'

According to Doland, however, even if Murphy disclosed the payments, that might still leave the perception of a conflict of interest.

"There is a big difference between a real and perceived conflict of interest," Doland said. "It's entirely possible she could have written completely objective stories about water issues. The point is perception would always be a problem. And we can't control what the public perceives unless we make it clear that we're totally independent.'

Murphy was also briefly the communications provider for the Southwest New Mexico Stakeholders Group — a short-lived planning organization that was working to implement the Arizona Water Settlements Act — in 2008, before resigning over differences with her duties.

Murphy was a staff reporter, then freelancer, for the Silver City Daily Press before founding the Grant County Beat.

— BENJAMIN FISHER

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