



Natural Resources Conservation Service
United States Department of Agriculture

Helping People Help the Land

Acequias

Fact Sheet

October 2006

The New Mexico Office of the State Engineer, Interstate Stream Commission, and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers can help acequia associations pay for construction of system improvements. The first step in receiving assistance through these agencies is to contact your local USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Field Office to initiate project planning.

The Interstate Stream Commission and NRCS have entered into an agreement whereby NRCS provides planning and design work for acequia projects. Construction for these projects may then be funded through the Acequia Construction Program that includes six sub-programs: the Loan Program, 80/20 Acequia Grant Program, Corps Section 215 Acequia Program, Corps 1113 Acequia Program, Legislative Special Appropriations Projects (Capital Projects), and Natural Disaster Assessment.

Origins

Acequia is a Spanish word meaning irrigation ditch, and is derived from the Arabic *assaquiya* (water carrier). Secondary and lateral ditches are called *sangrías*, a term that expresses the same wisdom as the Spanish saying, “El agua es la sangre de la tierra,” “Water is the blood of the land.” Another saying is “El agua es vida,” “Water is life.”

The origin of acequias and ditches in New Mexico has been traced by archaeologists and historians to Pueblo Indians and Spanish explorers and settlers. The Pueblos were reported to have been practicing irrigated farming when the Spanish explorers and colonists first came to the region.

The term acequias refers both to historic irrigation ditches, and, in New Mexico, the community associations that own and care for these ditches. Acequias are recognized under New Mexico law as political subdivisions of the state, and many of the state’s acequia associations have been in existence since the Spanish colonization period of the 17th and 18th centuries.

Governance

Historically, acequias have been a principal local government unit for the distribution and use of surface water. The associations have the power of eminent domain and are authorized to borrow money and enter into contracts for maintenance and improvements. Acequia associations do not have the power to tax, so the costs of maintenance and improvements are borne by the individuals served by the irrigation system. To participate in the Acequia Construction Program an acequia’s by-laws must be registered with the Office of the State Engineer.

First Step

Acequia contacts
NRCS Field Office
for assistance

NRCS does an on-site
review (meets with
acequia, identifies acequia's
objectives, conducts field
review)

Completes
planning
documents

NRCS begins design phase

Acequia reviews preliminary
drawings

ISC
authorizes
design

Acequia projects in
district prioritized in
consultation with Soil
& Water Conservation
District Board of
Supervisors based on
conservation goals

NRCS completes final design.
Acequia approves final design

Acequia responsible for
securing funds. Must have
water rights, by-laws,
easements, and 404 & 401
permits

ISC prepares
project
and loan
agreement

Acequia seeks bids
and submits to ISC for
approval

Final inspection by
NRCS, contractor, and
acequia. NRCS certifies
project.

Acequia awards
contract to
contractor

NRCS provides pre-
construction meeting
and construction
inspection services

ISC pays acequia.
Acequia pays contractor.

Acequia Improvement Process
in New Mexico with
Acequia Construction Program Funding