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Ditmer: Preserve Colorado's acequias

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By Joanne Ditmerdenverpost.com

With much of Colorado in drought, we should be diligent to protect a rare historical and traditional water-sharing practice.

"Acequias" are remarkable catalysts for sharing and producing food, a historic Spanish agricultural irrigation system of unlined water ditches that irrigate farmers' fields, with water flows directed by irrigators ceaselessly shifting tarps and dirt along the ditch and to neighbors down-stream. The unlined ditches recharge shallow aquifers and support biodiversity, unlike along the Front Range, where we are depleting aquifers.

In all of North America, this irreplaceable water system is found only in four of southern Colorado's poorest counties — Costilla (70 acequias, 35,000 acres, 270 families), Conejos (50 acequias, 45,000 acres, 100 families), and Huerfano and Las Animas counties — as well as across New Mexico, surviving three centuries of explosive change. It links the water users to their 16th century Spanish heritage, maintaining that culture across some nine generations in these isolated farmlands.

But modern civilization — agriculture's large center-pivot irrigation wells, oil and gas drillers, developers, today's water-guzzling spend-thrifts, even Taos wanting water rights — imperil this thoughtful water practice. Because acequias are so ancient, few have essential legal protections.

There is a significant and looming responsibility for county and state agencies to protect and support this unique tradition. It's a powerful tradition, with the practice of repartimiento followed when water is scarce. The ditches work together to ensure an equitable distribution of what flows are available or, if that's impossible, a sharing of fields.

Many acequia properties have never officially incorporated, and therefore are particularly vulnerable to Colorado's prior appropriation water doctrine of "first in time, first in rights." In 2009, the Colorado legislature passed a bill "to promote and encourage the continued operations of acequias and the viabilities of historic communities that depend on those acequias," but there are many pitfalls.

In October 2012, the first Colorado Congreso de Acequias, convened to preserve "the water and heritage of Southern Colorado's oldest farming communities," was held in San Luis, hosted by the Sangre de Cristo Acequia Association, drawing land owners and irrigators, agencies and officials, nonprofits, University of Colorado law students and others.

The students are helping with the ditches' annual spring cleaning to understand better the challenges. Years ago, before the ski area came to Telluride, I spent a week on Wilson Mesa, with my day's end task of shoveling dirt to open or close ditches. Later, north of Kremmling and over many years, I walked miles

along a cattle ranch's irrigation ditches from the late 1800s, perfectly placed, their headgates used for target practice. A city person has a lot to learn about how water defines the landscape, and our lives.

New Mexico was a century ahead of us. With statehood in 1912, acequias were immediately recognized and officially protected, and that activism there continues. "They have wonderful programs, advocate for the acequias, and gave our Congreso valuable insight," praised land and water specialist Sarah Parmar of Colorado Open Lands, who also staffs the Colorado Acequia Association in San Luis. These two and the CU Law School partner to provide low or no-cost legal assistance and educational materials to Colorado's acequia communities, and to help establish their priority rights to water under Colorado law.

For those who value Colorado's unique wonders and populations, the traditions and extraordinary history that shape our outlook and future, the acequias and their spirit of cooperation and sharing are a priceless and irrevocable legacy.

Joanne Ditmer's column on environmental and preservation issues has run in The Denver Post since 1962.