



2013 Colorado legislation: Acequia bill passes house, more inclusive than 2009 bill

[From](#) *The Pueblo Chieftain* (Matt Hildner):



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A bill that passed through the state House of Representatives in Denver this week would help preserve the communal irrigation ditches dug by Hispanic settlers when they came to parts of Southern Colorado.

The bill is the second measure from state Rep. Ed Vigil, D-Fort Garland, to address the ditches, called acequias in Spanish, but this version loosens landuse requirements for participation from the one he carried in 2009. "It's inclusive now," Vigil said.

The measure, which applied to pre-statehood ditches built in Conejos, Costilla, Huerfano and Las Animas counties, required that at least two-thirds of the land they irrigated remain in the long-lot style that would have existed at the time of settlement. But Vigil heard from irrigators that the requirement was too strict. While long lots, or *varas* as they're known in Spanish, can still be seen in Costilla County, they're far less common in the other counties. "That's just not the case here in Conejos County anymore," rancher Lawrence Gallegos said. "Today they've been consolidated."

He waters pastures off of two different acequias that were built in 1855 and 1856 and draw from the San Antonio River. Gallegos, who testified in favor of the bill before the House Agricultural Committee, said he thinks his fellow members on the two ditches might be interested in taking up some of the provisions from the bill. He pointed specifically to a clause that allowed the ditch the right of first refusal regarding the sale, lease or exchange of water.

The law also incorporates elements that were historically common to acequias but did not become a part of Colorado law, such as each member of a ditch having an equal vote. The measure would also allow for ditch policy that required members to provide labor for maintenance. Vigil did not know when it would be taken up in the Senate.