



## Chama Water Cut for Acequias from Abiquiú South

By Jeff Tucker, SUN Staff Writer

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Members of the Rio Chama Acequia Association are rotating irrigation schedules and utilizing a fraction of their traditional water rights in the lower Rio Chama Valley in a collaborative effort with state officials this summer in which irrigators in the breadbasket of Rio Arriba County are sharing drought-reduced water.

The plan to shut off ditches for certain periods each week, and to reduce diversions from the Rio Chama by about half at other times, was implemented by *acequia* members during the Fourth of July weekend and will continue until sufficient rainfall, said Rolf Schmidt-Petersen, Rio Grande Basin manager for the Interstate Stream Commission.

The New Mexico Office of the State Engineer/Interstate Stream Commission and leaders of the Rio Chama Acequia Association agreed to the water conservation plan that shuts off half of the *acequia*'s diversions from the Rio Chama on Sunday and Wednesday nights.

"Otherwise, they're running at about half of their normal diversions, if they're able to get it," Schmidt-Petersen said.

Interstate Stream Commission director Estevan Lopez said based on river gage flow data, the plan is working to protect San Juan Chama water for downstream users while maintaining water to the Rio Chama Acequia Association.

Schmidt-Petersen said the cities of Española, Albuquerque and Santa Fe all have contracts for San Juan Chama water. He said the state engineer is in charge of making sure those cities get their contracted water.

"They're doing this voluntarily," Schmidt-Petersen said of the Rio Chama Acequia Association. "These ditches have some of the earlier priority dates for water rights for non-tribal members in New Mexico. There have been a lot of people that have said, 'Wait a second, we're the senior-most water user in the system.' That's been tough for people to take."

If not for the rotating irrigation schedules, Schmidt-Petersen said the state engineer would have to shut down 13 or 14 of the 17-plus ditches utilized by Rio Chama Acequia Association irrigators and farmers.

“They decided they would essentially reduce their diversions by half,” Schmidt-Petersen said, adding the voluntary agreement to scale back water consumption is better than a strict priority administration implemented by the state engineer. “We’re working with them in a voluntary way. Basically, it’s a good thing to see because we’re getting water to people and we’re able to share in this tough time. I think it’s still difficult.”

Members of the Rio Chama Acequia Association, some of whom hold water rights dating back to 1600, met July 17 in Abiquiú to discuss river flows. Fred Vigil, chairman of the Rio Chama Acequia Association, convened the meeting to discuss the drought situation with *acequia* members.

Vigil said about 34 people representing all *acequias* below Abiquiú Dam attended the meeting, along with several staff members from the state engineer’s office and Interstate Stream Commission, which Vigil said were very helpful and provided good leadership and good information.

Vigil said a training class was held about setting gauges to the half diversions, and that the meeting went well.

“It wasn’t confrontational at all,” Vigil said. “I just wanted to make sure everyone understands the standards on the gauges so they can set the gauge correctly and we can all work together. Education is important to provide because with that we can satisfy the irrigation and increase the local knowledge.”

Vigil described the Rio Grande Basin as the breadbasket of Rio Arriba County, an area filled with gardens, greenhouses, hayfields and orchards.

“It’s the agricultural zone of the area,” Vigil said. “Most of the fresh vegetables that are sold in the Los Alamos, Española and Santa Fe farmers markets come from this region.”

Vigil said no crops were as yet endangered.

“No, because we’ve been able to provide water so far,” Vigil said. “The rotation schedule has assured us of water for all gardens and irrigation fields.”

Lopez said the drought has reduced the amount of surface water available throughout the state. Vigil said rainfall has been good around the Albuquerque area, “but not here.”

Lopez said despite the drought, Rio Chama irrigators are sharing water and making sure water owned by others is passed through the valley to the rightful owners.

“All of us working together, we can manage water,” Vigil said.

State officials said droughts have substantially reduced the supply of native water in the Rio Chama for two consecutive summers. Most of the water currently in the Rio Chama downstream of Abiquiú Reservoir is San Juan Chama project water imported to the Rio Grande from San Juan basin.

State officials said the water imported from the San Juan Chama project is not available to Rio Chama irrigators. They said that water is passing through the lower Chama valley for downstream owners.

Lela Hunt, public information officer for State Engineer Scott Verhines, said state authorities are working with *acequia* associations and others to examine plans to share water. She said the Rio Chama Acequia Association has been an “outstanding example of how to be flexible and adapt.”

Verhines said rotating irrigation schedules to maximize available water has enabled all of the 17-plus member ditches of the Rio Chama Acequia Association to get some water, instead of just one or two.

“New Mexico’s longest running non-tribal water users are an important example of how to get through drought and difficult times,” Verhines said in a news release. “Sharing water this summer is the only path forward.”

Gov. Susana Martinez commended the Rio Chama Acequia Association in the news release for agreeing to a model to stretch limited water resources.

State officials said the Rio Chama Acequia Association has been working with New Mexico Office of the State Engineer/Interstate Stream Commission and the Middle Rio Grande Conservancy District for more than a decade to offset the *acequia*’s use of water in times of drought by purchasing San Juan Chama Project water from various San Juan Chama contractors.

State officials said the innovative approach has worked in the past, but due to the prolonged drought, the Rio Chama Acequia Association has exhausted its limited supply of San Juan Chama Project water and that’s forced the *acequia* association to implement the rotation plan.

Schmidt-Petersen said despite recent rainfall, the Rio Chama diversions are still necessary.

“We still had to do those diversions,” he said. “If we get significantly more rainfall, the rotation schedule would be lifted.”

“We would need a lot of rain,” Vigil said.

Schmidt-Petersen said the Rio Chama Acequia Association had a similar water sharing agreement with state authorities last year.

“In most years, this will not happen,” he said. “The last time it was this dry was probably in the 1970s.”

Schmidt-Petersen said he has been having discussions about reducing water consumption with *acequia* leaders in the Upper Chama Valley, who have more junior water rights.

“They’re starting to work with us too to reduce their diversions to make sure the Rio Chama Acequia Association has more supply,” he said.