

## Acequias share water to combat drought

By J.R. Logan

*The Taos News*, June 27, 2013

At dawn Tuesday (June 25), mayordomo Norbert Ledoux waded into the gentle flow of the Rio Grande del Rancho, soaking his shoes and baggy sweatpants up to the ankles.

In a normal June, water would be roaring through the concrete diversion dam that feeds several acequias irrigating the Ranchos Valley below. This year, the river is only a few inches deep.

The extremely low flows have prompted four acequias that use the river to enter into a water-sharing agreement that some say hasn't been implemented since the devastating droughts of the '30s. Following a special meeting June 16, the acequias have agreed to take turns using the full flow of the river on a rotating schedule.

Per the sharing agreement, Ledoux's ditch — the Acequia Madre del Rio Grande del Rancho — will have the water for three days. The Acequia del Finado Francisco Martinez ditch will then have three days, followed by two days for the Acequia Abajo de la Loma and Acequia en Medio de Los Rios.

On Tuesday (June 25), the Rio Grande del Rancho was trickling at 2.3 cubic feet per second (cfs) — less than 10 percent of normal — according to the U.S. Geological Survey stream flow gauge near Talpa. Since 1952, the only other June with a lower flow was in 2002 when the river averaged a meager 1.7 cfs.

Given its current flow, none of the acequias would be able to do much if they all pulled from the river at once. Acequias — dug in the Ranchos Valley by Hispano settlers starting in the 1700s — are engineered to use the momentum of the river to push water down the ditches. Every turn and slight rise in the landscape slows that water, and it can be impossible to get it from the river to the fields when there isn't enough oomph.

Diverting the river into a single ditch maximizes the water's push and gets it to as many properties as possible.

"If you have the whole river for three days, you can accomplish a lot more," said Larry Mondragòn, chairman of the Francisco Martinez ditch commission.

Mondragòn said most ditch representatives recognized that water sharing was their best way to deal with the drought, and they were willing to agree to the water-sharing schedule following the special meeting in Talpa.

"We've got to work together in tough times," Mondragòn said.

In addition to the four acequias named in the agreement, there are at least 15 other acequias in the Ranchos Valley that feed from river, other acequias or springs. Representatives of many of those acequias were also at the meeting and signed the agreement.

A 1969 hydrographic survey from the New Mexico Office of the State Engineer says that the acequias that use the Rio Grande del Rancho and Rio Chiquito irrigate a combined 3,400 acres in the Ranchos Valley. But this year, many active parciantes have been limited in what they can get wet.

Mondragòn raises alfalfa to feed his family's herd of cattle. While he normally cultivates 14 acres, this year he could only get water to four acres, meaning he may be forced to sell off much of his herd because the cows will simply be too expensive to feed.

Even with the agreement and nearly the full force of the river in a single ditch, the water is still moving slowly. Ledoux said Tuesday afternoon that it took three hours for the water to get from the diversion dam to the first head gate a quarter mile down the acequia.

When diverting flows, Ledoux is sure to leave some water in the actual river. He says the ecology of the watershed relies on the water, and to dry the riverbed completely would create long-term problems for the valley.



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Norbert Ledoux, mayordomo for the Acequia Madre del Rio Grande del Rancho, diverts water into his ditch early Tuesday morning (June 25). The primary acequias in the Rancho Valley have agreed to a water sharing agreement because of severe drought conditions and low flows. Some acequia users say such an agreement hasn't been necessary since the 1930s.