

Valley Courier

The Rio Grande Basin roundtable ponies up \$100,000 for Acequia del Cerro piping project



Acequia del Cerro, San Luis

From the *Valley Courier* (Ruth Heide):

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Water leaders on Tuesday unanimously approved \$100,000 for an acequia rehabilitation project near San Luis.

Rio Grande Interbasin Roundtable Chairman Mike Gibson explained that Acequia del Cerro's application originally included a \$400,000 request for funding administered statewide through the Colorado Water Conservation Board. Each river basin receives an allotment to distribute, as well, and that is where the \$100,000 will come from. Gibson said the criteria for the state-administered funds have changed so this project no longer fit the criteria. Statewide funds can only be distributed to projects with statewide benefit now, he explained.

The local water leaders comprising the roundtable board have discretion over how they spend money allocated from the state to the basin account, however, so the group voted to provide \$100,000 locally for the acequia project.

Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is funding the \$400,000 shortfall the state declined to provide for the project, Gibson explained. This will be funded through the NRCS' Targeted Conservation Funds. NRCS is also providing \$200,000 for the acequia project through EQUIP (Environmental Quality Incentives Program) funding.

Consultant Diana Cortez described the acequia project to the roundtable on Tuesday. Acequia del Cerro is a 10-mile long system constructed in 1880, she explained. It is comprised of two systems, the north and south channels serving 82 water users and irrigating 1,880 acres of hay, grass, row crops and vegetable gardens between ; See ACEQUIA pg 3 Chama and La Vega Commons in San Luis. Acequia del Cerro consists of about five miles of earthen ditch and five miles of concrete ditch. It is the longest and most complex irrigation system in southern Costilla County.

The part of the project for which El Cerro Ditch Company requested funding is located at the bottom part of the system and will replace 1,900 linear feet of concrete starting about 20 feet from the main head gate. Cortez said the \$100,000 funding from the roundtable is a portion of the entire project, which is divided into phases. This funding will be used in Phase I, which is \$138,510 including the roundtable grant, \$33,000 of the funding from NRCS and the remainder from in-kind and cash matches. The entire project will exceed \$1 million and will encompass 15,000 linear feet of pipeline to rehabilitate the northern ditch "to assure proper water control, eliminate water loss and provide irrigation water to all landowners," as stated in the funding application.

"Costilla County is experiencing drought and in many cases, significant crop loss due to insufficient water from the Culebra Watershed. In addition to the drought, the landowners along the Acequia del Cerro are operating with a malfunctioning irrigation water system. With the implementation of this rehabilitation project, the Acequia del Cerro landowners will have a fully functioning irrigation system that will greatly reduce high sediment loads, promote cost effectiveness by minimizing maintenance , and provide increased operational flexibility. With the installation of the HPDE pipeline, the landowners will experience high flow capacity, elimination of bank erosion and sediment loading in the irrigation water and optimizing existing and future water supply needs for all landowners on the Culebra watershed."

Cortez explained to the roundtable that the old concrete ditch in use now will continue to exist, and the new project will be constructed alongside it. The new ditch will include a pipeline. Cortez said irrigators will still be able to use the old ditch while the new one is constructed so irrigation will not be disrupted during construction, which is projected to begin next spring.

She added that once the new project is complete, the old ditch would be maintained to catch sediment and rock that comes down off the hill.

“We feel it’s a valuable project,” Cortez told the roundtable members. In the ditch company’s application , the value of this project was described: “The sustainability of the Rio Culebra Agricultural Co-op and local farming methods that include heirloom seed products and organic grass and hay for cattle feed, may serve as a model for other parts of the state where irrigation water is either insufficient due to the drought conditions or to low efficiency of water use. With the rehabilitation of the Acequia del Cerro, which will provide a managed distribution, timed controlled and monitored water and irrigation system, the landowners feel that crop production will increase even in years of drought. The area associated with the project will essentially remain as it is now, providing wildlife habitat and a scenic landscape for visitors to this historic area of Colorado that demonstrates how the early Hispanic settlers of the area farmed and irrigated their lands.”