

Value of acequias seen

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SAN LUIS — The culture and production of food in Colorado and New Mexico was highlighted Saturday at the third Colorado Congreso de Acequias.

A historic Spanish agricultural irrigation system of unlined water ditches that irrigate farmers' fields, with water flows directed by the movement of tarps and dirt along each ditch, the unlined acequias are also believed to recharge the area's shallow aquifers and support biodiversity.

Costilla County has 70 acequias covering 35,000 acres and serving 270 families, while Conejos' 50 acequias, serve 45,000 acres and 100 families, linking the water users to their 16th century Spanish heritage, maintaining that culture across some nine generations in these isolated farmlands.

When heirs were being identified during the lengthy lawsuit to ensure access to the vast "Mountain Tract," also known as the Taylor Ranch, the owners and heirs of many early homesteads, or varas, were identified by their connection with acequias. "Without water, there is no life," says Norman Maestas, president of the San Luis-based Land Rights Council.

Many acequia properties were never officially incorporated, adding problems to use of the ancient ditches.

In 2009, largely at the urging of Costilla County water users, 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."

From the beginning, the congresos have drawn landowners and irrigators, agencies and officials, nonprofits, University of Colorado law students and others.

Law students have taken on the challenge of developing legal protection for the acequias.

Sangre de Cristo Acequia Association Program Director Sarah Parmar in a recent interview, said there is still much to be done about educating legislators and the public about acequias, while finding a place for the ancient systems in the state water plan.

This year's congreso agenda provides knowledge heavily focused on acequia bylaws and conflicts to support the community in Colorado water conversations.

Parmar explained that, "we want everyone to understand what the purpose of bylaws are and that they can be used in a way to continue tradition. Bylaws are also a tool to help people coming into and returning to the community. More integration of bylaws into practice can prevent arguments."

Those arguments come when water is scarce, she explained. Differing memories instead of bylaws are often recalled regarding the matter of sharing the resource.

The acequia association and the CU Law School partner through the Getches-Wilkinson Center to provide free or low cost legal assistance and educational materials to affected communities, helping establish their priority rights to water under Colorado law.