

## DEMING NEWS

### Washington seeks resolution to acequias use

U.S. Forest Service must come up with workable plan

POSTED: 06/18/2014 01:54:19 PM MDT

**WASHINGTON** >> U.S. Senators Tom Udall and Martin Heinrich and U.S. Representative Ben Ray Luján sent a letter to U.S. Forest Service (USFS) Chief Thomas Tidwell, asking that he work with them on a collaborative solution to ensure traditional users of Forest Service land can continue to manage and maintain acequias while staying within USFS guidelines.

The lawmakers note in their letter that members of New Mexico's traditional land grants and acequia associations have raised a number of concerns about new USFS requirements, which they say are unnecessarily burdensome and hindering their ability to do routine maintenance and repairs on their systems. The letter specifically mentions a recent dispute between the the Forest Service and the Abeyta-Trujillo Acequia Association near Abiquiú, N.M.

"This apparently new, more inflexible stance from the Forest Service flies in the face of the Service's purported commitment to work more collaboratively with traditional users of the lands, such as land grants and acequias," the lawmakers wrote. "We ask that your office assist in de-escalating the situation and engaging in discussions to find a path forward for reasonable acequia management that will not further strain relationships or lead to litigation."

Acequias, or community ditches, are recognized under New Mexico law as political subdivisions of the state of New Mexico, and many of the state's acequia associations date back to the 17th and 18th centuries. Historically, acequias have served as a primary tool for local governments to distribute and use surface water, and they continue to provide irrigation water for water rights holders. Disputes between acequia associations and the Forest Service have emerged relatively recently, as the Forest Service has required the associations to apply for permits to conduct routine maintenance.

The issue was raised during a meeting earlier this month between members of the congressional delegation staff and the Forest Service. The discussion and recent concerns raised by the acequia associations prompted the lawmakers to seek Tidwell's assistance in finding a permanent resolution.