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A Brief Acequia History

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The *acequias* of southern Colorado and New Mexico are the oldest water-management institutions in the United States of European origin. These irrigated agro-systems date to the time of Spanish settlement in the northern borderlands of *Nueva España* during the late 16th century with the Juan de Oñate colony in 1598 and expanded after the De Vargas resettlement of 1692. Due to the arid region, it was essential to settle near water. The irrigation technology employed by the waves of *pobladores* was gravity flow of surface water from rivers diverted to headgates through a system of earthen canals.

Without the aid of survey instruments or modern tools, early settlers engineered earthen canals on the desert landscape by the use of collective human labor. The first step, as instructed by the *ordenanzas de descubrimiento* (Laws of the Indies 1573), was to locate a bend in the river or another suitable feature to build a diversion structure from which to capture water and turn it into ditches. The *presas*, dams constructed of locally available materials such as forest timbers, brush and rocks at the diversion point, and the *acequia madre* defined the landscape and demarked the boundaries for irrigation for several miles downstream, extending the riparian zone beyond the narrow confines of the natural channels. These technologies of construction and irrigation methods were replicated by the successive waves of settlers into the upper watersheds of the Río Grande Basin, fostering the growth of agrarian communities along the *Camino Real de Tierra Adentro* from El Paso del Norte to Santa Fe and later to the Taos Basin and parts of southern Colorado, and eventually the San Juan Basin to the west and other tributaries of the Canadian River to the east.

During the 1598-1821 Spanish colonial period, water resources were owned and managed by a community of landowners, "*los dueños de propiedad regable*," all irrigating from a single main canal similar to what was found in medieval Valencia in southern Spain (Glick 1970). In New Mexico, each *acequia* system was built as a commons where the irrigators formed agreements as a joint labor force. Their path to self-government was aided by the lack of municipal structures in the immediate vicinity to prescribe their rules, appoint their officials, or to manage their irrigation system. *Arreglos*or local agreements prescribed how to govern their affairs and allocate water resources in a fair and equitable manner, and also to resolve conflicts and disputes.

Loose and informal, this cohesion of community members laid the foundation for the evolution of the *acequia* associations, recognized and empowered later in the territorial laws of New Mexico during the 1890s.Today there are about 800 local *acequias* in New Mexico and about 70 in the San Luis Valley of Colorado. After more than four centuries, *acequias* have maintained and

preserved the irrigation customs and mutual help traditions of earlier times. For the annual *limpia*, a ritual held every spring to clean out the ditch, *parciantes* everywhere renew their strong attachment to their locality for yet another cycle of irrigation and community antiquity. On the feast day of San Isidro, one of the Taos *acequias* celebrates the patron saint of farming by holding a *novena* and evening mass at their chapel followed by a procession along the parish roads and into the irrigated fields to bless the sacred landscape of springs, ditches, corrals, homes, the chapel and other religious shrines (Rodríguez, 2006).

To build capacity and mobilize support, the *acequia* associations organize educational programs, technical assistance workshops, and an annual meeting of the *Congreso de las Acequias* convened by the New Mexico Acequia Association. Will the *acequias* survive into the remaining decades of the 21st century? To the *parciantes* water is inextricably linked to the survival of community and is vital to the building of local food systems, healthy ecosystems, and a sustainable future not only for themselves but for other rural and urban water stakeholders in the upper Río Grande.

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