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New Mexico Acequia Association – 25 Years and Counting

By Paula Garcia

In 2014, the New Mexico Acequia Association is celebrating our 25th anniversary. It is humbling to mention such a milestone when *acequias* have endured in New Mexico for centuries. Through their long history, *acequias* have been keepers of tradition, the caretakers of water for growing food, and communities bound together for the common purpose of sharing water. For many generations, *acequias* have retained a great degree of autonomy in local water governance and have made possible the cultivation of locally grown food. This legacy of place-based knowledge of our watersheds, intertwined with food traditions, community and culture is very much alive in the 21st century.

The efforts of working toward a common purpose began before NMAA was founded, when *acequias* in various regions banded together for a united legal defense in water-rights adjudication in the 1960s. The first version of NMAA was established in 1990 by *acequia* leaders concerned primarily about the transfer of water rights out of *acequias* and attempts to change the use of those water rights away from agriculture to purposes such as subdivisions, resorts and industrial uses. NMAA leaders countered the adage “water flows uphill to money” and reframed the water issue with the statement, “Water is Life.”

By the late 1990s, *acequia* leaders recognized the importance of structural change in New Mexico water law to enact some protections for *acequias*. They needed a stronger collective voice in state water policy to have more of a decision-making role in water transfers. The NMAA reinvented the organization in 2000 so that it could serve to collectively advocate for *acequias*, and created the *Congreso de las Acequias*, a statewide governing body.

After a two-year statewide organizing effort, the NMAA led the passage of new laws to regulate water transfers and protect water rights from loss for non-use through water banking (both carried by the late Speaker Ben Luján and Sen. Carlos Cisneros). Since then, the NMAA has worked to ensure that *acequias* have a voice in state water policy. The Acequia Governance Project, dedicated to strengthening *acequia* governance and implementing new statutory powers of the *acequias*, was established during this same time frame.

While water was a driving force in uniting *acequias* for a common purpose, the NMAA also embraced work focused on youth in agriculture through *Sembrando Semillas* (Cultivating Seeds) and to encourage more people to serve their *acequias* through the Mayordomo Project. Both of these projects build upon the idea that *acequias* are not only about water; they are about families, youth, food and people entrusted with responsibilities to care for the *acequia*. NMAA's *Escuelita de las Acequias* (Little School of the Acequias) is an approach to experiential learning

where youth and adult leaders find support, inspiration and encouragement to fulfill their devotion to their communities and *acequias*.

We measure our work in centuries and in decades. It is important to honor the generations who came before us, to keep our *acequias* flowing, our lands under cultivation, and our waters under the care of local elected officials who have been doing this for the past 400 years. Likewise, in this rapidly changing world, we seek to honor the leaders of recent *acequia* history of the past 50 years who have devoted most of their lives to the continuation of the tradition. And we intend to encourage and support the current and next generation of *acequia* leaders. NMAA is working so that the intergenerational leadership of New Mexico's *acequias* can look back with respect and look forward with hope that our vision of *acequias* can become more vibrant.

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