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## **La Lama's water supply on thin ice Drought, forest fire mean low supply in northern community**

**By Elizabeth Cleary**

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For La Lama residents Justin and Linda Friedman, ensuring water continues to flow from their sinks and shower heads means performing a dangerous weekly ritual.

The Friedmans rely on an acequia for their domestic water supply, and filter the water that comes from their taps.

These days, acequias are generally used strictly for irrigation, but the acequia in La Lama, the Friedmans say, is one of the last around here used for domestic water. But given their acequia's drastically low supply in recent years, it remains to be seen whether that will continue.

Typically, during the winter, the surface of the water in the acequia freezes, but the water still flows beneath the frozen layer. This winter the flow has been so low the water can't flow beneath that layer without some coercion. So every Tuesday, the Friedmans, along with other La Lama residents, go out to the acequia and take an ax to the frozen water to get it flowing. They then stick a pipe in a hole they dig in the ice. The pipe connects to another pipe that runs to the cistern.

Balancing on ice while chopping through the ice to dig a hole is tricky work for a person of any age, but for Justin Friedman, who is 66, it is particularly challenging. He said he recently fell and hit his head on the ice.

"I was kind of woozy for a few hours," he said.

Young bodies in La Lama who might more easily perform this task are in short supply. Justin Friedman, who has lived in La Lama with his wife for 40 years, describes the community as being full of "old hippies" in their 60s and 70s.

This is the first winter that La Lama residents have had to resort to axes and sliding on ice to maintain the flow of water into their homes, but water issues have plagued this community, like many remote communities in New Mexico, for years. In 1996, a forest fire damaged the water shed that feeds the acequia, and the effects of that are still felt to this day. This combined with prolonged drought conditions has made ensuring water for La Lama residents an uphill battle.

Last summer, the community spent \$7,000 to install a pipe system that goes all the way up to the water shed to ensure the continuous supply of water to La Lama residents who rely on the acequia. According to a grant request Justin Friedman submitted to the state, this was the first time the acequia dried up in the 100 years it has existed.

Historically, 32 households have relied on the acequia for domestic water in La Lama, the Friedmans say. But in recent months, the supply has dwindled so much that it has completely dried up for many households, and those households must now rely on water hauling for their domestic water needs.

The mayordomo of the acequia, Nat Wilson, said he hasn't had water in his home since November, and now hauls water. The Friedmans have water in their home for now, but say they are unsure day to day whether that will continue to be the case.

In 2006, amid supply concerns and a growing population in La Lama, the La Lama Mutual Domestic Water Association installed a well using a \$400,000 grant from the New Mexico Finance Authority. The well was meant for use by the volunteer fire department and those households that don't have rights to the acequia, but because more and more households no longer have acequia water, those households now haul the well water to their homes.

"We're really in a jam up here," Justin Friedman said.

On Friday (Feb. 7), the Friedmans, along with Wilson and Jeff Allison, who is the chief operator of the well, demonstrated to a reporter and photographer visiting how they get the water flowing from the acequia each week. Though no one took a hard fall on the ice, they had a few close calls.

La Lama residents understand that continuing to rely on the acequia for water is not a realistic option. Justin Friedman submitted a capital outlay request to the state Legislature on behalf of the La Lama community to expand the well system. The current system has direct lines into just two households in La Lama through privately financed pipelines. The rest of the community that relies on the well hauls its water from the fill station at the fire department.

According to the request, the community seeks \$400,000 to expand the well system into a "fully functioning community and fire protection system." The request states that the community would like to install an additional well and extend pipelines so the well water flows into more households.

Justin Friedman reached out to the state Environment Department for guidance.

In an interview, Jim Chiasson, bureau chief with the department's field operations and infrastructure division, said he recommended La Lama request only \$50,000-\$60,000 in the immediate for planning and design, and request more at a later time. He said the community would be more likely to receive that money than the whole chunk at once. He said hooking up homes to a well and eliminating using the acequia will take years.

Chiasson said even if homes get hooked up to well water, this can only be a short-term solution. In the long term, La Lama needs a more plentiful water source, one that would be farther away, in order to meet the demands of the community.

Part of the problem, he said, is that there is not a lot of ground water available in La Lama. "Sometimes there just isn't a simple or cheap answer," Chiasson said.

Chiasson said serving the water needs of remote communities is an issue across the state.

“The drought continues to put pressure on everybody,” said Tom Brandt, a member of the division’s technical staff who serves Taos County and was also present for the interview.

Justin Friedman said as he sees houses go up in his neighborhood he grows nervous about the water supply.



**Justin Friedman uses an ax Friday (Feb. 7) to open a hole in the frozen acequia which he uses for drinking water. As the flow in the ditch decreases, the water supply becomes locked up in ice, resulting in residents having to look elsewhere for domestic water.**

Elliott Martin