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Acequia activism: Men and women help protect a vital network of irrigation throughout New Mexico

By [T. S. Last / Journal Staff Writer](#)

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Jose Maestas, a former mayordomo of Acequia de los Romeros near Las Vegas, N.M., was named Mayordomo of the Year by the N.M. Acequia Association. The outspoken Maestas works to ensure that water remains on the land for future generations. (Eddie Moore/Albuquerque Journal)



LAS VEGAS, N.M. – Jose Maestas says he hates to even use the term “water rights.”

A former longtime mayordomo, or “man in charge,” of an acequia that serves as the irrigation system for roughly 80 farmers in Las Vegas, N.M., Maestas shuns the concept of people owning rights to something bestowed by nature and so vital to all of human existence.

“Water rights? What the hell does that even mean?” he asked on a sunny December morning near his home on about 8 acres of land fed by Acequia de los Romeros.

Call him crazy, but Maestas, a mustachioed, affable, dry-witted 60-something-year-old who wears a hat that reads “Dinky Dau Fastpitch” – “Dinky Dau” a Vietnamese slang term meaning “crazy” – doesn’t think water should be owned by anyone.



Acequia Junta y Cienega irrigates 80 acres in the La Junta-La Cienega area of the lower Embudo River. (Albuquerque Journal File Photo)

“Water belongs to the land,” he says. “It’s important that water be allowed to flow on the land so we can grow our food. I think God made river bottom land for that very purpose: to grow crops.”

Water rights and urban development are the two biggest impediments to the acequia system that has been a part of New Mexico’s unique history since shortly after the Spanish arrived in the American Southwest more than 400 years ago.

It is said that acequias, which refer both to the irrigation infrastructure itself and the organizational structure of the water-sharing network, formed one of the first democracies on the continent. Then, as they do now, the parcientes, or acequia members, elect the mayordomo, who is in charge of managing the acequia.

To be sure, Native Americans used a channel system to irrigate crops prior to the arrival of the Spanish in New Mexico. But it was the Europeans, who learned from the Moors of North Africa – “acequia” actually an Arabic word meaning “canal” – who developed expansive irrigation systems and a system of governance that has stood the test of time.

“The fact that they are still flowing, and are governed through ancient customs and modern law, through the Spanish-colonial period, and territorial period, to statehood, speaks to their resiliency,” said Paula Garcia, executive director of the New Mexico Acequia Association, a nonprofit organization that, according to its mission statement, works to protect water and acequias, grow healthy food for families and communities, and honor the cultural heritage.

Part of that cultural heritage involves the annual spring cleaning of the acequias. That’s when the parciantes are mobilized to clear the ditches of debris, make any repairs to “compuertas,” or turnouts, and get the irrigation system ready for the growing season.

“That’s an event of great cultural importance and it serves a practical need because there’s always a need to have people clean ditches,” Garcia said, adding that family members who have moved away often come home to pitch in. “It’s a part of someone’s identity to come home and help clean the ditches in March and April.”

It’s not just Hispanic families anymore. She said that members of other ethnic groups who have purchased property tied to acequias typically embrace the system.

“Today, it’s more multi-cultural,” she said.

Garcia said there are approximately 700 acequias currently operating in New Mexico, a good many more in southern Colorado and only a few left in Texas.

The acequia system is still very much a part of people’s livelihoods and the culture of New Mexico, but urban growth and water scarcity present the biggest challenges to its existence, she said.

The “modern law” she mentioned tempers their subsistence and restricts expansion of the acequia system. “Whether adjudicated or not, all water rights have been appropriated,” she said, adding that some years there are more water rights on paper than there is wet water from the spring runoff and summer rain. And while, in New Mexico, water rights are determined by beneficial use, “any new use of water has to come from existing use,” she said.

And, these days, water transfers typically go from agricultural use to municipal and commercial use as local governments and developers buy water rights from food growers.

With water rights in northern New Mexico selling for as much as \$45,000 per acre-foot in the upper Rio Grande basin, it’s tempting for farmers to sell their rights. Maestas considers that a threat to the tradition of acequias in New Mexico and to farming.

“My ancestors could have sold their water rights and bought themselves a ’39 Chevy,” he decries. “What would we have then?”



A cornfield is flooded with irrigation from an acequia. (Courtesy of Juan Estevan Arellano)

El agua es vida

The motto of the state acequia association is “el agua es vida,” water is life. It is what sustains us and, without it, we would not survive.

Each year, the acequia association holds a Congreso, its annual convention, at which there are workshops, seminars and an awards ceremony.

Though he hasn’t served as mayordomo for the Acequia de los Romeros for many years, Maestas was this year’s winner of the Mayordomo of the Year award.

“In every community, there are people who give so much of their life to keeping acequias going. Jose is one of those people,” Garcia said. “He’s been very active in the community, and in advancing the mission of local acequias and keeping water rights intact.”

Maestas spent 15 or 20 years as mayordomo of his acequia. It’s a vital position.

“The mayordomos, and increasingly mayordomas as more women are involved, they hold the acequia together,” Garcia said. “They have to learn the way of the water – how it flows, where it leaks and where it backs up – and they have to know diplomacy. They have to have authority without coercion – authority through respect – and learn the nuances of people’s personalities to get dozens of families to cooperate.”



Brennon Buchannon, 8, jumps across Acequia Sena Salazar with his BB gun in 2008. Acequias have a long cultural history in northern New Mexico. (Eddie Moore/Albuquerque Journal)

Maestas did that.

“He’s outgoing and has a good way of relating to people on the ditch,” Garcia said. “He has always relayed a positive message about why acequias are important and done so in a positive way.”

Maestas’s friend and fellow farmer Max Garcia said Maestas goes on the radio several times per year to talk about the importance of water and acequias. He’s spoken to students at the middle school about the same thing and appealed to them to keep their trash out of the ditch, which runs across school property.

He’s also offered some of his own land to youth groups and fellow veterans to grow community gardens.

Max Garcia also relates a story about how, one spring, there was a problem with a clogged culvert that was causing water to back up and flood the road.

“He got fed up with what was going on and crawled inside the culvert. The thing was only about 2 feet wide, and he dug through that mud and found a 5-gallon bucket with a big rock in it and pulled it out. That’s Jose in a nutshell,” he said.

“I just wanted to show these guys that Chicanos could be tunnel rats, too,” Maestas joked, evoking another Vietnam-era term.

Max Garcia said Maestas also came to his aid in a dispute he has with the Office of the State Engineer over water rights to his property, just down the road from Maestas.

“I couldn’t afford an attorney for six acres of water rights, so I defended myself. But Jose was there to defend me and speak on my behalf,” he said.

Maestas says his friend’s predicament is an example of another obstacle acequias face: urban growth.

In this case, it started decades ago when “some highfalutin politicians decided to remove culverts and blacktop Cinder Road,” Maestas said.

“Another bright idea was when they decided to put in the walking path,” he said, referring to a paved bicycle/pedestrian path that runs parallel to Cinder Road.



An acequia along the Las Trampas in northern New Mexico is

suspended on a trestle. (Eddie Moore/Albuquerque Journal)

That prevented the acequia from crossing the road. It took a little doing, but the acequia was eventually able to get the culverts replaced.

As communities grow and intrude onto agricultural land, a lot of the times, water rights evaporate with it. Maestas said another danger is that water rights can be lost if the land is not irrigated for four consecutive years. With the advent of modern times, he said water has become a secondary concern to developers.

It hasn't always been that way. It used to be water was considered vital and a top priority.

"When areas were settled, the first priority was to build a church and an irrigation ditch to sustain the families about to live here," Maestas says just down the road from San Antonio Church, near the Baca Mansion, in a part of town that was once known as "Uppertown."

It is near here the Acequia de los Romeros has its presa, or diversion, from the Rio Gallinas and runs toward town, branching off to serve properties on both sides of 8th Street. It is the largest of about eight acequias that flow through the Las Vegas area, covering between what Maestas estimates to be about 3 or 4 miles of ditch.

Maestas speculates the acequia was named for a ranch hand of the prominent Baca family, who owned the mansion and much of the land along the river. The priority date, the year the system was constructed, is 1835.

Ever since then, the families that have lived along the canal, and grown corn, squash, beans and other crops have relied on the system to provide food for themselves and the people in their community.

"We had several years of bumper crops of corn and I had my kids sell corn off right off the truck. I wanted them to learn that life doesn't come through a grocery store," said Maestas, whose grandfather and father also relied on the Acequia de los Romeros for irrigation.

His three children are all grown up now. But it's them, and his children's children, and then their children that he worries about.

"I try to make some noise," he said of his outspokenness that has rubbed some city and county officials the wrong way. "I take it to heart. Water continues to flow to the land and it's important that water is on the land for future generations These acequias are important not only to this area, but also to anyone who wants to plant and grow real food, for lack of a better term."

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