



# THE TAOS NEWS

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## My Turn

### It's all about the water

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Taosenos have been left out of decision-making that will significantly change the land-based culture and traditions of Taos County. Caesario Quintana, director of the New Mexico Property Tax Division was recently questioned for five hours by the Legislature, which cited strong concerns about the impending loss of water rights due to losses in agricultural valuation.

Since water rights are tied to the land, the water belonging to the acres no longer valued as agricultural will be lost. Those water rights will be removed from Taos and sent elsewhere, likely to meet the compact with Texas. In times of top-down technocratic regulation, we need as a community to look at ways we can conserve water and keep it in the community.

Climate change affects stream flow, temperature, precipitation, snowpack, drought severity, earlier spring melting, and an increasing snowline elevation. The snowpack is critical for the health of the state's reservoirs, streams, acequias, as well as the people, animals and plants that depend on them, for survival.

Farming puts water into the ecosystem. Water from acequia ditches not only irrigates the soil, but helps fill the aquifer, as any water not absorbed by plants continues to seep down into the earth. If fewer acres are being irrigated, the aquifers will keep going down.

Farming in Taos is about landbased traditions. Sixty percent of Taos County residents live in rural areas, and poverty rates here are significantly higher than New Mexico averages. Most Taos County farms are small-scale farms or those with annual sales of less than \$10,000. According to NMDA the average net farm income for Taos County in 2011 was minus \$521, or a financial deficit.

One of the reasons farmers and ranchers aren't as active with their land is aging. NM has the highest average age of farmers and ranchers of any state; in Taos it's 60 years of age. The fastest growing group of farmers and ranchers are those over 65. For every one farmer and rancher under the age of 25, there are 5 who are 75 or older, according to Ag Dept. statistics. But there's no provision in the law for cutting any slack, time-wise, for older farmers.

Shortly after becoming director in January 2011, Caesario Quintana concluded, with the concurrence of Taos officials, that Taos County had a pressing need for a county-wide revaluation. In August 2011 the parties to such an agreement were then Taos County Assessor Darlene Vigil, the Taos County Commission (county manager's signature Commissioners

Chavez and Jaramillo were present), the Division of Finance Administration and the Property Tax Division.

The first removals of the agriculture special method of valuation took place in 2013. This process caused a huge amount of uncertainty and concern for taxpayers. Current regulations supposedly include provisions for considering drought, weather, water availability, expert agricultural opinions and data. Presumably, taxpayers can rest their land during periods of drought or recovery.

No one in the Taos County Assessor's office has a university degree in an agriculture area. The agriculture appraiser was "raised on a farm." But staff, whose numbers have grown considerably over the past few years, have attended workshops and seminars in agriculture, presented by NMSU and others.

The Protest Valuation Board which holds hearings for those protesting the loss of their agricultural exemption has no agriculture experience and produces an intimidating atmosphere. Assessor staff tried to discourage protests by saying "You won't win, and you'll waste taxpayer money."

In this process discrimination against aging could be predominant. However, there are questionable areas to be investigated, such as socioeconomic status, possibly gender, and ethnicity, yet undetermined.

Following a February 2014 community meeting, a small group composed of some agriculture-related agencies and citizens helped to prepare legislation, a brief resource manual and a list of individuals that farmers can hire to put their land to "bonafide agricultural use."

In a time of drought, recession and climate change, citizens need time to accomplish farming goals. Instead of helping, there has been an attitude of punishment and a lack of understanding and respect for small-scale agriculture. And, there is an emphasis on very strict interpretation of the law. Widespread involvement of Taos citizens, right from the start, should have occurred. Why weren't the consequences of the above actions logically thought through before beginning them? Water is essential in local food production both currently, and even more importantly, in the future. It's clear we can't afford to lose any of our water.

*Suzanne Wollter is retired university faculty (emeritus) and has managed a small commercial farm in Taos County for 10 years. She thanks Sonja Brinker in her thesis on "Climate Change and Ranching in Taos County" for some of the above data.*