

Reservoir upgrade to increase efficiency

By J.R. Logan

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Art Coca parks his beat-up Chevy Blazer and points through the windshield to the roaring Rio Chiquito as it comes barreling out of the mountains and into the Ranchos Valley, Tuesday (May 20).

Below him, a series of recently completed pools built from massive rocks slow the raging flow before it leaves the canyon.

Coca heads the Talpa Water Users Association and says it's been a decade since he's seen the river this high. Acequia users like Coca are reveling in a wet spring. But Coca and other parciantes on Talpa-area ditches have spent years making their irrigation system more resilient to prepare for times of drought.

Coca gestures toward a diversion gate on the north bank of the rock pool. The gate moves water from the Rio Chiquito, through 2,500 feet of buried pipe, and finally to the Talpa Reservoir less than a mile away. The diversion was completely rebuilt last year to improve the efficiency of the reservoir Coca oversees.

The water users association managed to hustle \$50,000 in capital outlay from the state legislature for the project. The project ended up costing \$115,000, and Coca says the difference was covered by a grant/loan from an Interstate Stream Commission program for irrigators. In the end, the acequias had to come up with a little more than \$6,000 to put toward the work.

The new diversion is only the latest in a series of projects that add up to \$2 million worth of work, Coca says, including \$300,000 that went toward rehabilitating the century-old reservoir.

Because the diversion lies in the National Forest, the water association first had to get approval from the Forest Service to do the work. Coca says the agency insisted the structure be built of only natural materials, and he says he's proud of how the finished works look.

According to Forest Service documents related to the project, the previous diversion dated back to the 1920s — about the time the reservoir itself was built. Coca says that structure was a simple dam of river rock buried in the willows. The rocks were restocked by hand every year to get water to flow into the compuerta (headgate) and along a concrete ditch toward the reservoir.

But Forest Service records say the concrete was leaking, meaning water that otherwise would end up in the reservoir was lost.

The agency signed off on the project in March 2014.

For Coca, these improvements are a valuable investment in protecting the agricultural landscape of the valley he's called home his entire life. Coca irrigates 25 acres in Talpa, but he's watched neighbors carve up agricultural land to build rental houses or park mobile homes.

If the acequia system can be made more efficient, Coca thinks irrigators will be assured there will be water. And if there's the promise of water, Coca argues property owners will be more inclined to stick with agriculture rather than subdividing or selling out.



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Art Coca, right, admires a recently completed diversion structure on the Rio Chiquito as the river comes roaring out of the mountains Tuesday (May 19). The diversion is only the latest in millions of dollars worth of acequia-related infrastructure meant to improve the efficiency of the gravity-fed irrigation system.