

Acequia in line for \$2.4M repair

By J.R. Logan

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An Pe-asco-area acequia is poised to get \$2.4 million in improvements, but some residents say they're still not sure why the project is needed.

The U.S. Army Corps. of Engineers recently awarded a contract to bury 3,300 feet of the Acequia del Llano de San Juan Nepomuceno, which diverts water from the Rio Santa Barbara and serves about 200 parciantes.

Bonifacio Vasquez, who was until recently president of the acequia commission, said in an interview Tuesday (Oct. 14) the project would ensure the reliable delivery of water to irrigators. Vasquez has been involved in moving the project forward since being elected to the acequia commission 11 years ago.

The section of the ditch to be piped runs below a steep hillside. Vasquez said there are concerns that the hill is eroding into the ditch, and that illegal dumping from a forest road that runs above the acequia is getting worse. In at least one case, the acequia bank has failed.

"It continues to be a problem," Vasquez said.

Vasquez said the acequia began seeking funding as far back as 2003 to do some kind of repair. Requests were made to the New Mexico Interstate Stream Commission, but the project price tag was too steep for that agency. Instead, the request was referred to the Army Corps of Engineers, which agreed to take it on.

That was in 2009. But the Corps' funding dried up, and the project languished until earlier this year.

Now, the Corps has awarded a contract and hopes to start construction this winter.

"This one is ready to go," said Patricia Phillips, a program manager with the Army Corps of Engineers in Albuquerque.

Phillips said the Corps is working on an environmental study (required under the National Environmental Policy Act, or NEPA), but it has not yet been made public. Phillips said the study was still being completed but a draft would be made public soon.

The lack of a study showing potential effects of the project has only added to questions about whether the project is necessary or is a good use of taxpayer funds. Vasquez said some parciantes raised those kinds of concerns at a meeting last weekend. Even without a completed

environmental study, he was confident the appropriate due diligence had been done. "As far as I know, every 'i' has been dotted and every 't' has been crossed," Vasquez said. "We've still got questions. I myself have questions. But I think, overall, it's going to be a good thing."

Perhaps the more pressing question for parciantes is how the project will be paid for. While the Army Corps of Engineers will cover 75 percent of the project cost and the state will pay another 17.5 percent, the acequia itself will be on the hook for 7.5 percent of the cost. Vasquez said even with \$25,000 awarded to the ditch a few years ago, each parciante will be asked to pay \$732 toward the project.

Vasquez acknowledged that the fee would be a hardship to some acequia members. He suggested the acequia ask for payment, see how much money came in, then find a way to borrow the remainder. "I know there are people who can't possibly afford this," Vasquez said. "Maybe it comes to a point where we need to have a bake sale, anything to get this done."