



# THE TAOS NEWS

Best U.S. Weekly Paper- NNA 2007, 2008, 2010  
Inland Press Nation's Best Weekly Newspaper 2009

## Lost ag status goes beyond effects of drought

By J.R. Logan

*The Taos News*, 12/17/2015

More than 180 properties have had their agricultural status yanked in the last year as part of an ongoing reassessment by the Taos County Assessor's Office that includes taking a hard look at all land designated as "agricultural."

According to data from the assessor's office, more than 800 properties have lost their agricultural status since the reassessment began in 2012. At that time, there were about 6,000 properties with some kind of ag classification countywide. It's not clear what percentage of the county has been reviewed at this point.

Owners of properties with agricultural classification — including irrigated lands and grazing lands — enjoy a significant break on property taxes under a state law meant to promote farming and ranching. The law requires that the county value the land at a very low price, meaning the corresponding taxes are also low.

But when ag status is pulled, the value of the land goes up to the market rate, which can be substantial in parts of Taos County. Many property owners have seen their taxes go up hundreds, even thousands of dollars from one year to the next.

In the last year, numbers from the assessor's office show that, in the median case, property values shot up 88 times when ag status was revoked.

In total, the increase to those properties has increased the county's property tax base by more than \$100 million, according to the assessor's office figures. The county is quick to point out that the increase does not mean more money in its coffers. Instead, it means the county generates the same revenue, but other property owners pay slightly less in taxes.

Awareness of the reassessment of agricultural lands and the increased taxes spurred significant outcry from the community, especially among lifelong residents of Taos County who owned land designated as agricultural, but who didn't necessarily have the cash to afford higher taxes.

Many people who lost ag status complained that the reassessment came at the height of a devastating drought that made it all but impossible to farm.

Concerned citizens formed an informal committee that lobbied the state legislature to provide some relief. Sen. Carlos Cisneros, D-Questa, and Rep. Bobby Gonzales, D-Taos, sponsored successful legislations to give property owners a break during prolonged drought.

But, as the reassessment continues to find plenty of fallow parcels, even as the drought has ebbed, it's becoming clear to some that the problem goes beyond a lack of rain.

"The drought was a way to bring up the issue," said Toby Martinez, who's part of a group that fought for the bill and is working to help preserve ag land in Taos County.

At the Legislature, Martinez said drought relief resonated with plenty of ranchers from across the state, and the bill saw overwhelming support. He said the next change to the law would be finding a way to protect elderly property owners from a sudden spike in taxes if they lose ag status.

At the same time, Martinez said he and those he's working with are also trying to get fallow land productive again.

In the long run, Martinez said it is becoming clear the challenge will be tackling social issues — such as an aging population of landowners and the high cost of land in tourist-friendly Taos — to hang onto lands that are the foundation of a proud, centuries-old tradition.

Martinez said he was optimistic. A forum on restoring ag lands drew hundreds last year, and the New Mexico Acequia Association was in town last week offering advice specific to the issue as well.

“We can turn this around,” Martinez said.