

Editorial

Our view: Acequias deserve better support

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Gov. Susana Martinez just delivered a damaging blow to acequias, the lifeblood of Northern New Mexico. A blow, we might add, that came with little mercy or warning.

As the governor decided which capital projects to approve, she vetoed projects that were going to repair the community ditches that deliver much-needed water to small farmers all across the north. Her acequia vetoes added up to almost \$1 million. Money for dams, dredging of channels and other repairs all died.

That means irrigators will have to work harder to get water to their crops, potentially damaging agriculture and definitely hurting what continues to be a way of life. As Paula Garcia, executive director of the New Mexico Acequia Association, put so well: “It would have been nice if this had been more proactive instead of cutting acequias off at the knees.”

Indeed, if Gov. Martinez sees acequia repairs as local pork, then she needed to come to the legislative session with another way to fund small water projects. Her after-the-veto remarks directs the ditch *parciantes* to seek money from the Interstate Stream Commission or the Water Trust Board.

That sounds great in theory but is more difficult in practice. The stream commission requires a 10 percent match, which the volunteer acequia groups have trouble meeting, while the trust board generally funds large projects, such as those in municipal water systems and large irrigation systems. The Water Trust Board’s smallest award in 2015 was \$150,000 for restoration work at the Santa Fe Municipal Watershed, for example. The governor failed to lead, rather than simply react.

What’s clear after this out-of-the-blue veto — Martinez approved all but one acequia project out of 20 in 2015 — is that legislators need to come up with a better mechanism of funding ditch repairs. Set aside money for acequias, not through capital outlay, but as a permanent funding stream. Find an independent board, whether the stream commission or trust board, to hand out the money. Don’t let the network of acequias wither because the state’s capital outlay process is unwieldy.

This is important enough to involve other governments, too. Counties, cities and even federal sources of money should be tapped. The ditches make agriculture possible in the north; if they dry up, economies will suffer. Small farmers deserve support.

Between now and the 2017 legislative session is the time to work on a way to pay for acequia projects that makes them — and the men and women who use the ditch water — less vulnerable to a governor’s veto pen. One simple fix might be to remove that match requirement from the Interstate Stream Commission’s program — its construction project fund has about \$1.8 million a year to spend, which could go a long way to helping acequias make necessary repairs. Or, set up an acequia fund within the Water Trust Fund and actually put money in it.

Treat acequias like the precious resource they are. Value their contributions, both to the agricultural economy and to New Mexico's traditional way of life. Set up a funding source. They are too precious to let dry up.