

Acequias organize at a crossroad

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A haphazard pile of shovels and rakes stuck out of the corner of the truck bed of Bobby Jaramillo, the mayordomo of the Acequia Madre del Río Pueblo de Taos.

The acequia is as urban an irrigation ditch as Taos has — one of its laterals makes it down to La Loma while another stretches forgotten along the side of Paseo del Pueblo Norte. Nevertheless, the *limpia*, the annual acequia cleaning, got started like most.

It was 7 a.m. Saturday (April 1) when Jaramillo and seven other workers gathered in the middle of a circle of full-sized Fords and GMCs in the parking lot of Kachina Lodge on the north end of Taos. They signed their names and started walking to the boundary of Taos Pueblo to start cleaning, chain-sawing bigger limbs and pulling dirt out of a clogged culvert.

Among acequia cleanings, Saturday's work on the Acequia Madre del Río Pueblo de Taos was somewhat unique. Some parciantes, those who own water rights on the acequia, showed up, but so did Taos Mayor Dan Barrone and Town Councilor Fritz Hahn. And so did a few people from Taos who, though they don't have water rights, wanted to see this acequia revitalized, moving water as it was intended.

But like its more rural counterparts, this acequia in a time of transition.

At the same time many of Taos County's on-the-ground water managers — acequia commissioners and mayordomos — shift their focus from a long-running water rights battle toward more grassroots concerns, acequias and whole stream systems are grappling with their shared and persistent challenges in order to chart a future of water in the Taos Valley. As Palemon Martinez, president of the Taos Valley Acequia Association, recently said, if irrigators are going to keep water in use in the valley, "It's critical we all work together."

Acequia Madre del Río Pueblo de Taos

As a quick primer, acequias are a centuries-old system of harnessing and sharing water in arid places, like New Mexico.

Juan Estevan Arellano, an acequia scholar and advocate who died in 2014, posits the word "acequia" originated in Yemen. Acequia technology, governance and culture from the Middle

East and the Iberian Peninsula were brought by the Spanish to the Southwest, where it mixed with Native American systems of water sharing to create the types of acequias that now line the Taos Valley.

Their purpose was simple: survival.

“The acequias were not built for the modern-day watercolorists to paint; they were a necessity to survival, for without the acequia water there would be no food,” Arellano wrote.

Though few people actually showed up to clean the Taos acequia, the morning was emblematic of the time-honored tradition of the *limpia*.

Jaramillo and the rest of his crew dug mud out a cement culvert that was filled three-quarters of the way full, shoveled out the bed and walls of the acequia that were littered with leaves, cut overhanging branches of fruit trees and cottonwoods and tossed them out of the way so the rest of the crew members could make their way down the tight, overgrown ditch.

The cleaning was the most recent stab at a three-year effort to revitalize a portion of the 30 miles of urban acequias in the town.

In 2015, the town of Taos joined up with Rocky Mountain Youth Corps to repair the lateral that brings water to Kit Carson Park. Last year, dual-credit students spent a semester mapping all the acequias in the valley. And on Saturday, the town – itself a *parciante* on the Acequia Madre del Río Pueblo de Taos – and citizens worked to clean out the La Loma lateral from Kachina Lodge to the *desagüe* (an outlet ditch to return unused acequia water to the river) at the Lovatos ditch at Ranchitos Road, a project that was also supported by the Taos Soil and Water Conservation District.

Despite the town’s enthusiasm to get more water flowing through the acequia and get more people irrigating in the traditional way, the ditch faces many of the same problems as the other acequias spread across the valley. It’s those common challenges around which acequias, stream systems and the whole valley are beginning to organize.

Visitas

The Taos Valley Acequia Association, the organization that provides legal and some organizational guidance to individual ditches, has spent the last four years navigating and negotiating the legal monstrosity that is the Abeyta adjudication, a resolution to a water rights dispute that has been more than four decades in the making.

Now that Abeyta is heading into the “administrative phase,” where the technical details of water management must get sorted out, the association is looking to chart a path for itself and the valley’s acequias for how to deal with the problems that persist among the area’s oldest infrastructure.

Over the last few months, the association has organized and started to host visitas – gatherings of each of the seven stream systems in the valley rather than just individual ditches.

The second of seven visitas happened Sunday (April 2) at the Llano Quemado Community Center, where a few dozen people from most of the 11 acequias that flow off of the Río Grande del Rancho showed up to share their thoughts and brainstorm potential solutions.

“We really want to hear what the acequias are saying,” said Sylvia Rodríguez, a scholar and an outreach coordinator with the association.

No one really knows the full picture of the valley’s acequias — from basic numbers like miles of mother ditches and laterals to the long-term challenges mayordomos and commissions are facing — because the knowledge is so localized.

The visitas are an effort to “hear what people need so we can envision a future together,” Rodríguez said.

Chief among the concerns of acequias is the dwindling participation of parciantes, who are meant to show up to the annual limpia and membership meeting in addition to paying dues.

If parciantes don’t show up for the cleaning, it’s hard to maintain the integrity of the ditch. “If they’d show up as parciantes, we could get more done,” Jaramillo told The Taos News. As with the ramshackle stretch of the Acequia Madre del Río Pueblo de Taos, the willows grow thick while branches and litter clog the culverts, preventing water from making it all the way down the ditch and back into the river, compromising ecosystems and the very functionality of acequias.

The same sentiment was echoed by leaders on the Río Grande del Rancho acequias. “You don’t have as many people as you used to,” said one parciante. Furthermore, the burden of maintaining acequias is falling on a population of irrigators that is only getting older.

Relatedly, good record keeping is becoming critically important. As families transfer property to their descendants, the parcels of land and their water rights are divvied up. But official records with acequias, town, county and state offices don’t always reflect that. As a result, the parciantes’ rosters are out of date.

The problem has compounded over the years to the point that commissioners have no easy way to get in touch with current parciantes — either to entice them with the carrot of debt forgiveness or prod them with the stick of property liens.

And with fewer people paying in, a small number of parciantes ends up footing the bill for maintenance.

On a bigger scale, acequia commissions are facing threats to acequia rights of way, such as fences, and the acequia infrastructure itself from development both public and personal. In some cases, property has changed hands so many times and water rights exercised so infrequently that

newcomers are completely ignorant of the ditches. Occasionally, they'll build their houses right on top of laterals or the *desagües*, blocking water and compromising the acequia system.

As Taos Councilor Hahn told The Taos News, with so many short-term rentals and second homes in the town, "People not knowing about acequias ... is a huge problem."

'Comes from within'

Some acequias have it easier than others.

The Acequia Madre del Río Pueblo de Taos has some of the political and financial weight of the town behind it, meaning it can benefit from projects like reviving the ditch in conjunction with Department of Transportation repairs to Paseo del Pueblo in 2018.

Yet the solutions to many of the problems facing more remote acequias seem to boil down to the acequias reclaiming their power and authority as one of the oldest forms of government in the United States.

For example, threats to acequias from development can often be mitigated by commissioners and *parciantes* holding property owners and developers accountable to local land use regulations that have specific language concerning setbacks near acequias.

"Vigilant acequias will catch things ... because the skin is off our teeth," said Rodríguez.

Several *parciantes* said that acequias should take a more active role in reaching out to all the entities that deal with land transfers, like real estate agents and title companies, to educate people about the basics of the water infrastructure running through many properties in the valley.

Furthermore, each acequia has to take on the task of cleaning up the *parciantes* rosters — and that means the hard, unpaid and often unappreciated work of sifting through records at various offices, knocking on doors and mounting campaigns to bring water rights holders back into the fold.

"It comes from within," said Oliva Romo, communications and outreach coordinator with the New Mexico Acequia Association.

"You're the ones irrigating. You're the ones raising your grandkids [on the land]," Romo said.

While each ditch has to exercise its authority, so do stream systems — like the Río Grande del Rancho.

The *visitas* and any new events or collaborations that come out of them are opportunities to "take it to another level," said Rodríguez.