

Tensions rise over Abeyta settlement mitigation wells

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TAOS, NM - Opponents to mitigation wells proposed under the Abeyta Water Rights Settlement gathered Thursday, (April 27) outside of Taos Town Hall to express their concerns over a closed meeting being held inside by parties involved in the long-running case.

Several *acequia parciantes* – landowners with irrigation rights on traditional ditches – were present at the meeting to gain information on the project and negotiations they feel largely estranged from.

Outside, protestors from Arroyo Hondo, Taos and Arroyo Seco met around 9:30 a.m. in front of the town building holding signs and greeting those entering the building to attend the meeting. “There are many of us in Arroyo Seco and Arroyo Hondo who are against the mitigation wells,” said demonstrator Lori Stiles. “They go against our culture and tradition in the area.”

The Abeyta case grew out of decades of dispute over water rights between Taos Pueblo, acequias in the Taos Valley, the Town of Taos and mutual domestic water systems. A settlement in the nearly 50-year-old case was reached in 2012. The mitigation wells in question are wells to be drilled in the Taos Valley as a means of water storage and restoration.

Water from the Rio Lucero would be diverted to a ditch and well station where it would be pumped nearly 1,000 feet underground into the aquifer for use by irrigators and people in the Arroyo Seco area. That water would be saved in the wells for storage for later use in irrigation. In addition under the settlement, other mitigation wells would be drilled along the Rio Grande del Rancho, Rio Chiquito, Rio Fernando and Rio Hondo to pull water from the underground aquifer to supply stream flow and offset the effects of pumping by the Town of Taos and the El Prado Water and Sanitation District.

But acequia members have been pushing back against the planned mitigation wells. Parciantes and community members from the Acequia del Río Lucero y del Arroyo Seco, for example, voted against the the mitigation wells on March 11.

On Thursday, several demonstrators were concerned of the quality of the water and feared chemical treatments as well as mineral deposits that could be potentially harmful in the future. In addition, many feel that they have been largely left out of the process as the Abeyta Settlement continues. “The entire process has not been a democratic process,” said Doug Bridgers of the Acequia Madre del Rio Lucero y del Arroyo Seco. “The notion that the decision has been made on our behalf by a very small group of people and now our job is just to implement it, is not ok.” Taos Pueblo is looking at receiving nearly \$88 million in the future as a part of the settlement for use on water rights acquisition, wastewater and well systems as well as a recharge project for the Buffalo Pasture wetlands which has cultural significance to the pueblo. The Pueblo maintains aboriginal rights to water, meaning the tribe can allocate as much water

as they deem needed for their use which could total the water in the Rio Lucero and the Rio Pueblo de Taos. Demonstrators insisted that their position was not to oppose the Pueblo's acquisition of water or water rights, but to negotiate a more eco-friendly and conversationally friendly approach to storing and recharging water supplies. "We were under the impression that the maintenance, service and operation expenses were going to be covered," Acequia del Monte Rio Chiquito Commissioner John MacArthur said during the meeting inside town hall. "In terms of the operating expenses, we don't have anything like the money to maintain or operate a well like this." *The Taos News* and other media presented were asked to leave the meeting after initial presentations because it was meant to be for planning purposes and more free-wheeling discussions needed to take place, according to federal Bureau of Reclamation representatives. More than two dozen people were in the meeting including representatives and attorneys from the pueblo, town, acequias and mutual domestic water systems. A quorum of elected officials was not present at the meeting. Federal representatives said they will be conducting a public meeting regarding the Abeyta Settlement sometime during the summer but have not yet scheduled the date.



Opponents to the Abeyta Water Rights Settlement gathered Thursday outside of Taos Town Hall to express their concerns for the water deal. Communities of Arroyo Hondo, Arroyo Secco and Taos will be affected by the settlement which has been in debate for over 50 years.

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