

## Tensions rise over Abeyta Water Rights Settlement mitigation wells

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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 on negotiations from which they feel largely left out.

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 at least six wells to be drilled 1,000 feet deep in the Taos Valley as a means of water storage and restoration. Some hydrologists believe the deep aquifer water is separate from the surface waters that flow in the rivers.

The well that is proposed for Arroyo Seco would store winter water for later use by irrigators. Water from the Rio Lucero would be diverted in the winter to a pipeline and well station, where it would be treated and 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 during summer 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 streamflow 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 Rio Lucero y del Arroyo Seco, for example, voted against the the mitigation wells on March 11.

On Thursday, several demonstrators were concerned about 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. Others worried about the cost of maintaining the mitigation wells once they are installed.

“The entire process has not been a democratic process,” said Doug Bridgers of the Acequia Madre del Rio Lucero y del Arroyo Secco. “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 have cultural significance to Taos Pueblo.

The Pueblo maintains aboriginal rights to water, meaning it has the first rights to draw irrigation water from rivers in the valley for its 5,712.78 irrigated acres of land. Under the settlement, the Pueblo can divert up to 22,508 acre-feet of water out of the Rio Pueblo and the Rio Lucero and consume no more than 7,883 acre-feet of water on the land. An acrefoot of water is equal to about 325,851 gallons of water.

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. "In terms of the operating expenses, we don't have anything like the money to maintain or operate a well like this."

Some of the *parciantes* during the meeting expressed concerns about the long-term aspect of the mitigation project and asked how the overall drilling and maintenance was to be paid for over the course of several years. The representatives also asked about the potential for contamination of the irrigation water and its effects on livestock and pasture.

*The Taos News* and other media present 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 Taos Pueblo, the 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 gather outside of Taos Town Hall to express their concerns for the water deal. The communities of Arroyo Hondo, Arroyo Seco, Taos and others will be affected by the settlement, which has been in debate for nearly 50 years.**  
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