

My Turn

## **Our acequias are vital to our way of life**

**Fritz Hahn**

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For many generations, acequias have been the literal and figurative lifeblood of our community. Not only have they delivered precious water for agricultural purposes, but they have also brought neighbors, friends, and the community at large together to work and to celebrate the return of another promising growing season.

Many people aren't aware of the historical and cultural significance of our water delivery system. Acequias are the oldest form of water management and delivery in the United States, arguably originating from the ancient Puebloan culture and greatly expanded with Spanish colonization. Every acequia has a *mayordomo* who acts as the superintendent of our water. An acequia commission, elected from the *parciantes*, establishes and administers the rules in a democratically run governing body, manages the delivery of water, settles disputes, and directs the maintenance of the ditch system. These systems serve a vital role in recharging our aquifers and protecting riparian habitats downstream. Within the Taos Valley there are nearly 35 miles of ditches. The largest acequia within the Town of Taos is the Acequia Madre del Rio Pueblo de Taos, which in 1969 irrigated almost 500 acres, with almost 5 miles of main ditch, another equal length in laterals, and an unknown length of *linderos*, *venas*, or *sangrias* (sometimes referred to as *parciante* ditches).

Unfortunately, our acequia system is not only being threatened by drought and high demand on our water resources, but also by deferred maintenance. Make no mistake, if our acequia system is abandoned, so too are Taos' history and culture.

As a result of deferred maintenance, drought, demographics, and lack of awareness, challenges abound. More sub-surface water is pumped as acequia water delivery is structurally compromised in many areas. Drought adds to the flow inconsistencies, resulting in citizens relying on potable irrigation. Residents who are new to the area may not be aware of the significance of the annual ditch clean-ups, or the acequia system in general, and are not participating in them, leaving fewer people in the community to volunteer for the maintenance. Changing demographics compounds the problem. Our elders' knowledge of our intricate ditch system is lost as many of our children leave for school and jobs, interrupting the availability of a younger *parciante* workforce and the inter-generational transmission of our elders' knowledge of the system. Without the help from our community, our agricultural heritage will become even more threatened and the historic appearance of our town will fall further into decline.

The acequia system in Taos is vital to our way of life and we must take action to protect it.

As a result, the Town of Taos as *parciante*, has been recruiting citizen volunteers to help clean, repair, and revitalize our acequias. All are welcome; children must be accompanied by an adult. In the past, our eldest volunteer was in her 70s. Volunteers work at their own pace

and the camaraderie is heartwarming. For more information on volunteering, please call me at 758-9585.

Another positive step forward occurred recently when Acequia Madre Commissioners Charles Chacon, Jim Schlaurbaum, and Nick Romero, along with Mayordomo Bobby Jaramillo, invited the entire community to attend a celebration of the release of water into Kit Carson Park. Everyone came together to thank the many volunteers who have worked on the Acequia Madre.

It was heartening to see the community coming together in celebration of this time-honored tradition. For those who missed it, or for the people who came out and want to continue to be part of the public awareness and volunteer programs dedicated to the protection of our acequias, there are some other very important, upcoming events.

On June 25, the Taos Valley Acequia Association will be conducting its Visitas Program to hear and discuss parcientes, *mayordomos*, and commissioners' concerns about the issues confronting their six respective acequias feeding from the Rio Fernando Watershed. They will offer perspectives on the current condition of nearby ditches and maintenance needs for nearby landowners and other interested parties.

Another important gathering will take place on July 29 where volunteers, in collaboration with the Town of Taos and Taos County, will be conducting a Rio Fernando clean-up day. Those who are interested in participating should gather at the St. James Episcopal Church at 8 a.m.

Our hope is that more people in the community get involved in learning about the traditions, culture, and history surrounding our acequia system, and work with us to protect it. *Preservando la comunidad y tradiciones!*

To stay up-to-date with upcoming events, please check out the Town of Taos Facebook page at [facebook.com/townoftaos](https://www.facebook.com/townoftaos) or our Twitter account at [twitter.com/townoftaos](https://twitter.com/townoftaos).

*Hahn is a Taos town councilor.*

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