



# THE TAOS NEWS

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## My Turn

### Rio Fernando watershed needs protection

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Sometimes I think we should change the name of the Carson National Forest to the Carson National Pasture. A recent Camino Real District Ranger was typical of many Carson Forest managers when she referred to trees in general as “straws sucking up the water.” If we begrudge shade trees of the water they need to live, we will not have shade. Right now, the lack of shade from trees and shrubs on the upper Rio Fernando is causing huge water losses from evaporation.

Even the grass on these stream banks is cropped down to “4-inch stubble” under existing guidelines. After many decades of intensive federal grazing, there is no longer a sufficient “green sponge” to soak up water into the surface aquifer and supply year-round flows to water users downstream.

In recent years, many Rio Fernando stakeholders have been worried because some parts of the stream near town have often dried up completely. That does not bode well for the Taos aquifer or the town wells that depend on it. But the deeper “mitigation” wells proposed by the Abeyta settlement would come with a high mineral content and steep operating costs.

There is a better way. A sustainable future for Taos depends on increased water conservation as well as building new reservoirs and revitalizing the time-tested acequia systems, which will replenish the groundwater and help Taos achieve food independence.

Equally important, Taosenos have to demand the restoration of the historical flows of cold, clean water from the Rio Fernando headwaters. We should protect and restore the water source that Taos has relied on for centuries and avoid pitting five local water districts against each other in a race to the bottom of our common aquifer.

On the upper Rio Fernando, many acre-feet of water are being lost every year to the evaporation caused by trampled mud from cattle, which is blocking the stream. Those water losses and the shocking bacteria loads going into this river are posing unnecessary risks for Taos residents, visitors, and parciantes, as well as Taos Canyon property owners.

When livestock grazing is ended on these stream banks and knee-high grass, shrubs and trees are restored, year-round flows to Taos acequias and existing wells will steadily increase, making deeper wells unnecessary. Remember, if we start punching deep holes into the Taos aquifer, international fracking corporations may someday demand the right to do the same thing.

Despite President Trump’s opinion about climate change, almost everyone else can see that global warming is real. In the arid Southwest, clean water is becoming more precious every day. Taos citizens and their elected representatives must act now to protect the surface flows on the upper Rio Fernando and stop the E. coli impairment on these headwaters. It is crucial

to restore the trees, shrubs and tall grass on the stream banks to bring back a shaded river environment and reliable flows of cold, clean water. If they know what is good for them, local politicians will draw a line in the sand and stand up for the battered Rio Fernando before the next election. But this issue is too important to leave to career politicians and federal land managers, who seem to be captives of the status quo.

Let's face it: Taosenos will not be getting any answers or solutions for the water losses on the Rio Fernando from paralyzed federal bureaucrats, who are scared stiff by the angry baby in the White House. It is up to Taos residents to demand that our county commissioners pass an effective livestock regulation to protect the stream banks of the Rio Fernando from federal grazing and restore the wooded "green sponge" that has been lost. It is a little-known fact that local regulations regarding livestock control on federal grazing allotments are provided for on the first page of every federal grazing contract. Under that clause, the Taos County commissioners can enact an ordinance anytime that would permanently protect the Rio Fernando stream banks from federal livestock impacts – that is, anytime they have the political courage to do it. So far, Taosenos and local politicians have taken the insults to this river lying down. But, as Mia Farrow said in *Rosemary's Baby*, "This is no dream – this is really happening." It is time to wake up and stop the nightmare on the upper Rio Fernando, so we can achieve the dream of a sustainable future for all Taosenos.

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