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Repartimiento, Drought and Climate Change

By Sylvia Rodríguez

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Acequia irrigation in Santa Cruz, northern New Mexico.

Photo by Alejandro Lopez

Faced with too little water to irrigate as usual this spring, many acequia officers are currently holding stream-wide meetings to talk about how to share and manage the shortages. This is done according to local custom. Traditional acequia governance is geared to accommodate conditions ranging from the abundance of water to extreme scarcity. Within a single acequia system or association, the mayordomo allocates water to parciantes in good standing according to principles of equity, proportion and need. Within a stream system, the river is shared among upstream and downstream acequias according to principles of need and equity as well as a proportional or rotational procedure for dividing the water (repartimiento). Such customary agreements have been worked out over generations of recurrent negotiation between neighbors under fluctuating “normal,” plentiful and adverse conditions. Each is tailored to its own particular history and place. Some ultimately achieve the status of legal decrees while others may remain unwritten but are nonetheless clearly understood by all who inherit and observe them.

For example, in times of abundant or average flow, some acequias adhere to a proportional division of a stream. But when the flow is low, upstream acequias may agree to close their headgates for a designated period of time so that the water can reach those lower on the stream. Parciantes may petition their

mayordomo for an auxilio or special dispensation of water for a few hours to water livestock or a small kitchen garden that puts food on their table. There are times, however, when there is too little water in a stream to even reach the headgate. This can happen late in a normal irrigation season, or early on in a drought year such as 1996 or 2018. Preparing for the worst, yet ever hopeful for better times to come, acequia farmer-ranchers may decide to buy less seed, plant less acreage, and sell or butcher livestock during an especially difficult year. Unable to irrigate, resourceful parciantes will instead focus their energies on repairs to headgates, ditches and desagües (drains), and on clearing property of brush that can fuel wildfire. They can revise or fine-tune their bylaws to include protective provisions for water banking and that empower commissions to evaluate proposed water right transfers.

Drought tests the integrity and resilience of an acequia community. Acequia farming, management and governance depend on a combination of subsistence practices as well as principles, values and attitudes that some scholars call a moral economy. The core principles of the acequia moral economy include reciprocity, mutualism, confianza (trust) and respeto (respect). How well an acequia fares in times of drought depends also on the character, dedication and personal example of individual officers and parciantes.

Acequias have proven a resilient and sustainable system for managing water as a commons during four centuries of adaptation to New Mexico's unforgiving, semi-arid environment. But today, in addition to the impacts of economic, social and political forces that escalated during the 20th century, these small-scale farmer-managed irrigation systems are challenged also by climate change. Scientists and our own perceptions confirm that climate change is upon us. Climatologists' broad consensus holds that the U.S. Southwest is undergoing not just periodic drought punctuated by unpredictable patterns of precipitation, but an overall process of aridification. No one knows for sure what the future will hold, either for traditional land-based agrarian or concentrated urban populations.

The time has come when we must ask ourselves what practices, values, habits and policies are more likely to sustain future generations under conditions of increasing pressure on limited resources, especially water. Will public policy favor the privileging of individual advantage over public welfare, harnessing itself to a state-sanctioned engine of continuous growth for private economic profit? Will a top-down, zero-sum game of prior rights to a monetized vital resource totally supplant a moral economy of shared shortages, reciprocity, mutual commitment, and living within our means? Or will the time-tested lessons and deeper wisdom of acequia governance help to illuminate a viable path through the coming uncertain decades?



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