

Will Arroyo Seco acequia go it alone?

Parciantes to vote on TVAA membership

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The *parciantes* of the main acequia in Arroyo Seco will be making some big decisions about the future of their ditch at a special meeting this weekend.

They'll choose whether to remain a member of the Taos Valley Acequia Association, the long-standing regional acequia organization that is a major player in the complex water-sharing agreement known as the Abeyta Settlement as well as a model of cooperation for other acequia alliances around New Mexico.

However, that cooperation may be splintering.

The Acequia Madre del R'io Lucero y Arroyo Seco hasn't paid its annual dues to the valleywide organization, which has left the acequia in a state of "limbo" when it comes to its affiliation with the Taos Valley Acequia Association, according to Chris Pieper, a commissioner on the Arroyo Seco ditch.

"The TVAA has not demonstrated they are actively representing (our) acequia," Pieper said. The acequia has over 300 *parciantes*, according to Pablo Quintana, another Seco commissioner.

The special meeting is scheduled for Saturday (June 23) at 7 p.m. at the Arroyo Seco Community Center.

The Arroyo Seco ditch isn't the only one considering leaving the regional organization, according to TVAA board member Gabriel Olguin.

Other acequias, such as those in Las Colonias, are considering similar moves, he said. The discussions stem from failures the valley association is working hard to address, he said, such as a gap in communication from the ground up — from irrigators to acequia commissioners and finally to the people involved with the TVAA.

"The more acequias stand up for their voice...about what they want from the TVAA, the better chances we have at a better organization," Olguin said.

Yet it's far from clear how the acequia members, or *parciantes*, will vote. "There's a lot of people for it and against it," Quintana said of his discussions with *parciantes*.

"It's really hard to answer that."

Should they vote to part ways, it wouldn't be the first time the Arroyo Seco ditch has split from the herd on water issues in the Taos area. In 2017, the acequia *parciantes* voted overwhelmingly to reject one of two key proposals in the Abeyta Settlement.

The Abeyta Settlement is a legally binding resolution to Taos-area water rights disputes stretching back decades. In 1989, Taos Pueblo claimed a right to nearly 8,000 acre-feet of water each year out of the R'io Lucero and R'io Pueblo de Taos. (One acre-foot of water is 325,851 gallons.) If the pueblo were to

assert its full rights in this arena, it could mean water users downstream, including Seco irrigators, could be left dry. The TVAA asked the pueblo to negotiate a deal to avert that scenario, rather than face the uncertainty of lawsuits between the tribe and non-Native water users.

The pueblo agreed, and the deal is now known as the Abeyta Settlement. The settlement was largely finalized in 2013, and now the parties are figuring out how to make the rules on paper work out in real-life hydrology and engineering.

The Arroyo Seco *parciantes* present at the 2017 meeting voted unanimously against going after federal government funding for a project known as Aquifer Storage and Recovery (ASR), Pieper said. The ASR idea essentially calls for pulling water from the R'o Lucero during the winter, pumping that water deep underground and then pulling it back out of the aquifer during irrigation season to increase the flow of the acequia.

But *parciantes* thought it would be too expensive and technically cumbersome in the long run.

Though it's not on the agenda for Saturday, members of the Arroyo Seco ditch could soon vote on the other idea for water storage: building a reservoir. However, going forward with the construction of a reservoir faces many of the same challenges as the deep aquifer proposal.

"It's going to be a very costly project," said Quintana. "They may pay for it all in the front, but the cost of maintain and running it would way exceed what we could afford. The government don't give away nothing for nothing."

He's worried that if the acequia couldn't pay for the upkeep on the underground storage facility or reservoir, the future control of their water rights could well be in jeopardy.

"Water is more precious than oil," Quintana said.

As a direct response to the unknowns of the water storage ideas in the Abeyta Settlement, some Seco *parciantes* are researching comparatively cheap ways of accomplishing the same goal, such as installing cisterns around the community, so extra water could be stored without a costly bill to the acequia.

"It's distributing the water in times of excess for use in times of lack," said Pieper. "People tended to see the rationale of investing in low-tech systems that people can maintain, that people can have individual control over, rather than (approving) these big, centralized projects."

Irrigators will also be discussing ways to improve soil health in their fields, which Peiper said also helps water filter into the aquifer and replenish the acequia.

The Acequia Madre del R'o Lucero y Arroyo Seco will also vote on shifting the time for the *limpia*, the annual ditch cleaning, from spring to fall to account for climate change and more seasons like this year when the spring runoff comes fast and early, leaving irrigators entirely dependent on the summer monsoons for much of the growing season.



Members on the main irrigation ditch in Arroyo Seco, which includes the head gate in this undated photo, have split from the herd on water issues in the Taos Valley before. Last year, they voted down a major proposal in the Abeyta Settlement. This Saturday (June 23), they'll vote on whether or not to remain part of the Taos Valley Acequia Association, which has been the primary advocate for traditional acequia users in the settlement negotiations.

Photo courtesy Acequia Madre del R'io Lucero y Arroyo Seco

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