

Fixing historic ditches for when water flows

– *Submitted report*

The Taos News, 7/26/2018

Lillian Trujillo grew up in Taos' La Loma neighborhood where her family raised crops and livestock using an acequia that once flowed right through town. But over the last few decades, that acequia and other ditches were paved over or fell into disrepair, causing breaks in a complex irrigation system that not only watered gardens and pastures, but replenished water wells and nourished trees across the Taos Valley.

“The acequias are our lifeline,” says Trujillo, who’s been trying for more than a decade to fix her ditch and get acequia water back to her property. “The water isn’t just for planting. It’s important for all of Taos. It’s for the trees. It’s for the aquifer. It’s for everything.”

This summer, a crew from Rocky Mountain Youth Corps is getting acequias back in shape, so people like Trujillo can get water flowing again. For 10 weeks, a crew of young adults is cleaning ditches, clearing ponds and reservoirs, and doing site prep for larger acequia infrastructure projects.

The crew is part of a collaboration between the youth corps, the town of Taos, Taos County and the LOR Foundation, with technical support from Taos Soil and Water Conservation District. The goal is to not only help irrigators who want to see ditches stay functional, but it’s also to expose a new generation of Taosenos to the reality of modern acequia culture in Taos County.

“My grandpa always had me in the field since I was able to walk, helping him with the acequias,” says Guillermo Martinez, a 17-year-old crew member who grew up in Arroyo Seco and Talpa. “It’s sad that people aren’t keeping the fields going, keeping them agricultural instead of putting houses and buildings on them.”

This project is, in part, the next phase of another youth program undertaken by the Taos Soil and Water District in 2016. That project used crews of young adults to take inventory of 11 acequias in and around the Taos town limits.

The inventory found that many acequia sections in town were either “threatened” or “endangered.” Another four acequias were classified by the crew as “extinct.” Work done by the crew this summer has addressed some of those issues and will set irrigators up for a good season in 2019.

“They’re doing a remarkable job,” says Charles Chacon, chairman of the Acequia Madre del Rio Pueblo acequia

commission. “If there’s water next year we’re going to be run it in places where we haven’t be able to in years.”

Members of the crew say they’ve been surprised to see how vast the acequia network is and how poor the condition of the ditches is in some places. They hope their work will not only last this season and the next, but will motivate acequia users to keep up with maintenance for years to come.

“We worked a lot through residential areas, and there was a lot of people thanking us for cleaning up the ditches, and saying that they hope there’s water soon for all the work that we’ve done,” says crew member Aurelia Chavez, 19, who grew up cleaning her family’s acequia in Caon. “A lot of the older people like to see the kids working out in the ditches, and this might inspire some of them to keep them clean.”

The youth corps acequia crew will be in the field until Aug. 10. Follow the Rocky Mountain Youth Corps on Instagram ([instagram.com/rockymountainyouthcorpsnm](https://www.instagram.com/rockymountainyouthcorpsnm)) for regular updates on the crew’s progress as well as other Rocky Mountain Youth Corps activities.



**A Rocky Mountain Youth Corps crew shows their finished work restoring an acequia in Taos.
Photo via Facebook**