

Century-old Talpa Reservoir gets \$300K makeover

By J.R. Logan

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In 1919, a group of Talpa farmers began work on a reservoir near the mouth of the Rio Chiquito. Using picks, shovels and mule-drawn scrapers, the farmers labored for years without pay to build the reservoir, which was intended to store water and bolster flows in acequias below.

Nearly a century later, the state has appropriated \$300,000 to rehabilitate and improve the stability of the aging reservoir. By shoring up the dam structure, installing an impermeable liner and removing overgrown brush growing that was choking the lake's banks, irrigators hope to be able to store more water for the parciantes who still rely on the Acequia Madre del Rio Chiquito and the Acequia del Monte del Rio Chiquito.

Today, Art Coca heads that Talpa Water Users Association —the organization charged with overseeing the reservoir. Parked in his Ford pickup in early November, Coca, 78, watches as an excavator moves dirt on the dam. He's parked next to a mountain of willow branches that were dredged from the reservoir by their roots.

Coca's grandfather, Rogerio Coca, was among the farmers who originally established the reservoir. Coca is proud of that heritage. He calls the reservoir "the jewel of the community" and he's happy to see it getting a shine.

On his dashboard is a stack of reports, funding applications and structural designs. The reservoir got a modest overhaul in 1987, but it has been harried with problems during the last decade.

Since at least 2005, the dam has been under the scrutiny of the state's Dam Inspection Bureau, which labeled it "unsatisfactory" and said it had a "high hazard potential" following a 2009 review. A year earlier, the state engineer imposed a limit the amount of water the dam could store in order to prevent a blow out.

In 2010, Coca filed an application for funding with the New Mexico Water Trust Board — a body charged with recommending projects for legislative funding. Coca sought \$300,000 to do the work mandated by the state. Without the project, the reservoir would have to be abandoned, the application said.

In October 2011, Coca got a letter from the state announcing that \$300,000 (a \$270,000 grant and \$30,000 loan) had been approved to fund the Talpa Reservoir project. The grant required a \$30,000 match, \$25,000 of which was provided by the Healy Foundation, with the Taos Soil and Water Conservation District providing the remaining \$5,000.

The result is a facelift for the reservoir and improved irrigation for water users.

On paper, the Talpa Reservoir serves 500 people and provides irrigation water to 1,200 acres.

Gael Minton is a commissioner on the Acequia del Monte and a Taos Valley Acequia Association board member. Between the rehab on the dam and thousands of dollars in improvements made to the ditch itself, Minton said Acequia del Monte will be more efficient and will be able to reach parcientes at the end of the line near the Taos Spa on the southside.

If long-term projections of reduced precipitation prove accurate, Minton says such infrastructure improvements are obligatory if irrigators hope to continue centuries-old traditions and protect open space south of Taos. "We're ready if there's water," Minton says.



Crews conduct rehabilitation work at the Talpa Reservoir earlier this month.

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