



THE TAOS NEWS

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My Turn

Who speaks for the water

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Life in Taos as we know it is in serious jeopardy. Behind closed doors, federal, state and local agents are planning to manipulate our water without any public input. Water is the life-blood of our community. Crops, trees, pastures, and animals all depend on it, as do we — the people of Taos. And now, due to a settlement most people don't understand or even know about, all of this is threatened.

The Abeyta Settlement is a highly complex document that contains plans, shrouded in legal language, to potentially transfer thousands of acres of surface water out of Taos County and to pump unsustainable quantities of ground water. The consequences of these actions will have irreversible and potentially devastating effects upon our beautiful valley and our ability to sustain life.

The government's answer to virtually every water crisis is to pump more water and drill deeper. As part of the Abeyta Settlement, the federal government and New Mexico taxpayers will each contribute 44 million dollars — some of which will be used to drill at least 18 deep wells, averaging 2,000 feet, throughout Taos County. This deep ground water is very different from the high quality, clean ground water we pump from our home wells. According to geologists and hydrologists, this water will likely have high concentrations of heavy metals including arsenic, fluoride, and uranium — common to deep wells in volcanic areas such as Taos County. The Abeyta Settlement has made financial allowances for the treatment of arsenic, but has no plan for the removal of the other toxins from the water.

Operation and maintenance of these deep wells is costly and, in the future, once the temporary funds are used up, the high costs of these supply wells will be borne by us — the taxpayers.

Hydrologists know that pumping ground water affects surface waters. Springs and streams can sink into the depleted aquifers and eventually dry up. The State Engineer claims that the deep aquifer is not connected to our shallow ground water and pumping will not cause drain down — a claim many geologists and hydrologists disagree with.

The acequia systems recharge our shallow aquifer. Without the acequia recharge, the average ground water depth in Taos would be hundreds of feet deeper, causing many people to have to drill deeper wells. Taos is one the few places left on the planet that has a local, community-run system of water management not controlled by government water masters. Acequias are a cultural treasure as well as an integral part of our hydrologic system and the Abeyta Settlement threatens their survival.

Until recently, New Mexico Pueblos could only lease water rights for 10-year periods.

A New Mexico law enacted in 2014 allows Pueblos to lease water rights for 99 years. The Abeyta Settlement acknowledges close to 12,000 acre-feet of water rights for Taos Pueblo. All other Taos settling parties are given a combined total of 365 acre-feet of water rights. The Abeyta Settlement has given the Pueblo \$15 million, specifically for purchasing acequia water rights in Taos County. Taos Pueblo can lease those rights to distant urban developments for undisclosed sums. Doesn't the state of New Mexico care about preserving our acequia culture and the long-term health of our rural communities? Apparently, the answer is no.

Our situation in Taos is summed up very well in a statement made by Peter Vigil in *The Taos News*, "If you need water rights for development in a state that's already over-appropriated, you go after the weak first — the ones with aging infrastructure, lost ag status, and lack of participation. It's ripe for the taking."

The primary use of water is to sustain life. The water in our valley comes from the Sangre de Cristo Mountain Range, which some believe is named for the life-giving water that flows freely from its slopes. The ancestors of Taos Valley clearly considered water as sacred; treating water as a commodity would have been incomprehensible. Our precious underground aquifer is a collective resource. If we are wise, we will only live off the interest — not squander away the principal with nothing left to give our children. As a community, let's focus our energy on developing strategies to conserve our water and protect its quality.

Contact your local and state politicians. Also talk to your majordomo and ditch commissioners and make sure your ditch bylaws protect your water rights from being sold or lost to outside interests. Water rights are like civil rights — know them, and use them or lose them.

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