

My Turn

'Live and thrive within the limits of our watershed'

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Acequia culture in north-central New Mexico is based on the best of human principles — democratic self-governance, cooperation, stewardship of communal resources, and a spiritual connection to the land.

These “water democracies” powered by people and gravity, evolved as a direct response to the scarcity of water in the arid regions of the Middle East and are thus models of how to adapt to a changing climate where precipitation is unpredictable and conflict inevitable. Maintaining a shared resource strengthens community, making it more resilient to increasing economic, social, and environmental pressures and uncertainty. As humanity enters into what some call “the long emergency” of a post oil economy, acequias offer us a vision of a livable future based on the most effective power source available – human collaboration, collective vision, and mutual support.

Despite their great historical, cultural and environmental significance, the acequias of northern New Mexico and southern Colorado have received little support from our political leadership. Living acequia systems in Spain, Morocco, Oman, and Iran have received UNESCO World Heritage status because of their “outstanding universal value.” The acequias of our region are globally significant as well offering the world a wealth of knowledge on the sustainable use of water, maintaining local communities and promoting respect and intercultural dialogue.

As our world loses more and more of its precious cultural diversity, acequia communities become even more relevant and valuable. As such, we have a responsibility to protect and celebrate our 400-year-old acequias as a global treasure. And now, due to a settlement few understand or know about, all of this is threatened to die.

The Abeyta Settlement is a highly complex document that contains plans, carefully crafted by lawyers, to hide its real intent – to transfer thousands of acres of surface water out of Taos County, pump unsustainable quantities of costly and potentially toxic ground water, and make investors millions of dollars at our expense. When Wall Street wants to control and profit from a resource such as oil, water, and minerals, they get corrupt politicians to fund massive public work projects that ultimately bankrupt countries or local communities. When the projects quickly become too costly to maintain, then investors take control and exploit the resource. This scenario has played out all over the world.

The government's answer to virtually every water crisis is to pump more water and impose more regulations and controls on water users. As part of the Abeyta Settlement, the federal government and New Mexico taxpayers will each contribute \$44 million — 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 a study by Glorieta Geosciences, much of this water will have high concentrations of toxic heavy metals including arsenic, fluoride, and uranium — common to deep wells in volcanic areas such as Taos County.

Who will pay for the expensive maintenance and operation of these wells estimated by Schlumberger Engineering to be over \$50,000 a year? It will be the acequias, mutual domestics and anyone who uses this deep water. We are being told that we must give up our clean, gravity-fed, and locally self-governed surface water for toxic, expensive and corporate controlled ground water.

The plan is simple — bankrupt our acequias and mutual domestics, drive up the price of water, and take control of the resource away from the people. Let's remember that the ancestors of Taos considered water as sacred; treating water as a commodity would have been incomprehensible.

The Abeyta Settlement is not a done deal. There are other ways.

The Hopi have been growing blue corn in the desert with no supplemental irrigation for over 1,000 years and when they were offered wells and drip systems, they refused on the grounds that their way of growing corn, sustained through a spiritual connection to the cosmos and the Earth, is central to who they are.

Let's learn to live and thrive within the limits of our watershed. A fraction of the \$135 million deep wells budget could be used to invest in educating our community about acequias, improve our aging acequia infrastructure, increase water conservation, and restore our soils and food systems. In this way, we can rejuvenate the land, conserve our water, and sustain the health of our acequias and local communities for generations to come.

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