

My Turn

Abeyta Settlement fails people of Pueblo, Valley

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The Abeyta Settlement fails to serve the best interest of the people of Taos Pueblo and Taos Valley, and threatens the longevity of the cultural and traditional backbones of our community.

It has been paid for by the state of New Mexico and the U.S. Federal Government, and has been lobbied for by the Taos Valley Acequia Association and its team of hydrologists and lawyers, who do not live in Taos, who have histories of fighting against traditional water-sharing, and who have deceived our acequias into believing they are protecting our best interests.

The settlement spends millions of taxpayer funds, to serve the short-term economic interests of property developments, the fracking industry and water speculators from Santa Fe to Texas. Effective civil and legal awareness and protest of its implementation by stakeholders on Taos Pueblo and in Taos Valley can force the due process, feasibility and environmental considerations, which should have been requisite conditions of any party's signature to the Settlement.

For more than one third of a century, the Abeyta Settlement and several other statewide adjudication processes have been designed to satisfy future water needs for state and federal economic interests across the Rio Grande Basin, by drilling more wells and increasing spending to pay for paper water transfers from vulnerable neighboring watersheds, leading to irrationally managed water systems with profoundly unequal social impacts on the peoples they are supposed to serve — peoples whose traditions are uniquely rooted in historically tried and tested practices of water-sharing in regions of water scarcity.

To expedite the capitalization of our water rights, the Abeyta Settlement was negotiated behind closed doors, protected by court gag orders, with little public hearing and in violation of the due process of acequias. Once again, the generally accepted principle of free market capitalism, which upholds economic gains over all else, has trumped social and environmental considerations.

In the last 30 years, this capitalist dogma has not served more than 90 percent of the people of Taos Pueblo, Taos Valley or New Mexico — evident in failing economic indicators from education, incarceration, health, drug use and suicides. Meanwhile, local politics have failed to respond to the chronic symptoms of short-sighted decision making, in part because of the predisposition of our citizens to entrust its traditional values to those in power, rather than forming a compact with younger generations who can ensure the kind of multi-generational resilience necessary to preserve our shared water prosperity.

At the deep heart of our community is the Taos Pueblo, who successfully fought to protect Blue Lake, and have shared the waters of the Rio Lucero and Rio Pueblo ever since the first

visitor arrived in this valley. The Abeyta Settlement takes away your aboriginal rights to the water of Bear Lake and Blue Lake, puts a price tag on them, and markets them to the highest bidder, who has no future interest in returning them. At what price will your council sell the waters from Bear Lake and Blue Lake and is it worth the loss to your future generations?

At the strong limbs of our community are acequia systems, whose waters are fed by the rivers of Taos Pueblo and the springs and aquifers they replenish. This settlement saddles your 400-plus-year-old democracies with future economic costs that cannot be paid for without monetizing your water rights, and the untested production and injection wells they are planning for, threaten the water quality of not just your acequias, but also your home and agricultural wells. At what price will you sell out your agrarian traditions and children's health?

I call on all Abeyta Settlement signatories to agree to return to negotiations and apply socially responsible triple bottom-line analysis to settlement terms, in line with the values of our peoples and not the economic priorities and timeline of the state and federal government, and incorporate conservation alternatives that engage and employ our youth. A conservation and civil engagement approach has the potential to yield more water rights over the long-term, than what the settlement's network of wells and pipes are expected to produce in their short operational life.

In Flint, Michigan, criminal action was taken against the water commissions, yet since the acidic water corroded the domestic pipes, it is the people who will most likely be handed the bill with no retribution to those whose responsibility it was to plan and operate the system in the first place. Let's us heed their warning and not let history repeat itself here in Taos.

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