

Taos regional water plan hits milestone

By Meg Scherch Peterson

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Spanish *partidas*, law 3: “Las cosas que son de todos y todas – son l’agre, sol, [lluvia], agua y el mar.”

“The things which belong in common to all the living creatures of the world are the air, rain, water, the sea and its shores; for every living creature may use them according to his wants.”
— *Taos Regional Water Plan*

The full plan is available at ose.state.nm.us/Planning/RWP/region_07.php.

When Andrew Chavez said that maybe the solution to improving the economics of agriculture in the valley was to grow marijuana, subdued chuckles and outright guffaws helped relieve the palpable tension among stakeholders at a January meeting of the Taos Regional Water Plan (TRWP) update.

Six months later, those fears — about losing water rights, about acequias drying up, about the effects of development and drought on the water supply — persist. And yet, the TRWP update — a two-year project spearheaded by the state and led locally by the town of Taos and Taos County — is a done deal. In all, eight meetings took place, which were to the public and centrally located in town.

On July 21 at the Santa Fe Roundhouse, County Commissioner Tom Blankenhorn and County Planner Nathan Sanchez presented the plan to the Interstate Stream Commission. Taos was among the first of 16 planning regions throughout New Mexico to have its plan accepted.

Now what?

Is the plan destined to sit on a shelf and gather dust as some contend? Or is it a tool, as others believe, to guide state funding and local land use planning?

“A plan is only as good as its implementation,” said Rosemary Romero, contracted by the state to facilitate the planning process for Taos and other regions. Romero said the plan will be “used to help educate the Legislature by providing them with a quick feel for the variety of projects in a region. It’s a catchall.”

Consider the 240-page document a kind of “Instagram snapshot” of where we are in the here and now. Want to know whether a neighboring mobile home park, condo development or nearby septic service has a groundwater discharge permit? Concerned about sources of pollution in the creek behind your property? You are likely to find answers to those questions in the plan.

Quick overview

Included data compiled by the state are population and economic trends; pertinent provisions of state, federal and tribal water law; a list of federally protected species; state water quality standards; and definitions of water use categories — even summaries of significant court cases involving domestic wells.

The public welfare statement — hotly debated eight years ago — was not revisited this go-around.

Fast facts

- We have 300 regional acequias. (At a water plan meeting, a local *mayordomo* asked, “Is that number correct? Where are they?”)
- Our population is expected to climb, but only slightly. Population forecasts from the earlier 2008 plan have been revised downward.
- Our total projected water demand in 2060 is just 4,547 acre-feet per year more than now.
- Nearly 80 percent of our water use goes for irrigation.

Blankenhorn considers the executive summary his “Bible,” adding that “land use planning will be impacted by the water plan.” He foresees that in 2016-2017, the county will likely revisit its comprehensive plan, which may play into whether or not the subdivision regulations are updated. County Commissioner Candyce O’Donnell said her role in the planning process was to focus on the mutual domestics in her district.

“It was important to get information out to everybody so that their projects would be included. If the project is included, it gets extra points for consideration by the Water Trust Board,” she said.

The board, made up of 16 members, recommends projects for funding to the Legislature.

Which brings us to the real meat of the plan — the PPPs — or projects, programs and policies.

By the numbers

None of the nearly 280 PPPs have been ranked or prioritized. There are 145 acequia infrastructure projects. There are also mutual domestic water system infrastructure (WSI) projects from around the region, including in Cerro, Tres Piedras, Talpa, Trampas, Questa, Llano Quemado and Vadito, to name a few. The water districts of El Valle de los Ranchos and El Prado are also represented.

- Questa is requesting some \$1.45 million to acquire water rights.
- Red River has 18 WSI projects.
- Taos Ski Valley has 10 WSI projects.
- Taos County contributed an umbrella of projects, including those of the Taos Watershed Coalition and the CCWPP (County Community Wide Protection Plan).
- The town of Taos has six WSI projects.
- The Taos Soil and Water Conservation District (TSWC) has about 12 projects, including well data collection and monitoring.

- Watershed health, improvement, fire safety: about 10 projects, including Amigos Bravos' widely reported Water Gems project and Trout Unlimited's stream improvements.

How did the planning process work?

A wide group of stakeholders participated, yet historic skepticism, old fears and well-founded grudges hovered at the edge of the meetings like ghosts of Christmases past. Key figures in the formation of the first plan were largely absent this go-around. Kay Matthews, well-known writer and water activist, declined to participate, but through her online newsletter, *La Jicarita*, keeps her finger on the region's water pulse.

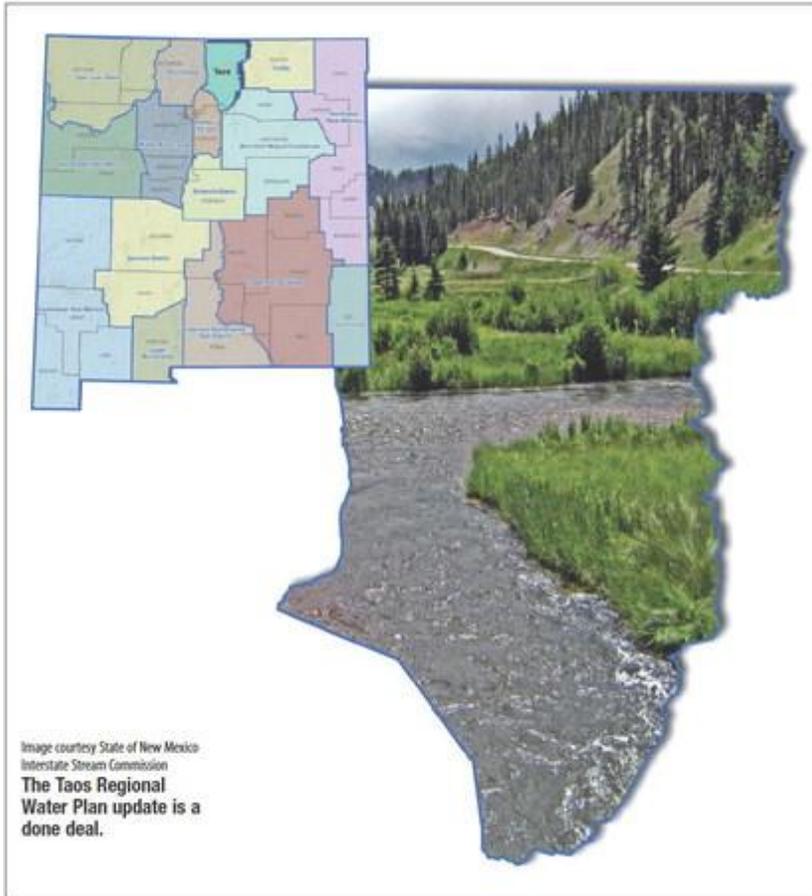
The El Valle resident expressed some of her concerns by email. "As the adjudications (Abeyta and Amodt) move forward there will be more and more pressure put on rural communities and senior water rights owners," she wrote.

Trudy Healy and Ron Gardner also largely avoided the process, although their funding and expertise contributed to extensive well water quality and well monitoring research, and these are documented in the references section.

Peter Vigil, director of TSWC, felt the largest positive outcome of the water planning process was "creating awareness through gathering public input." Carlos Miera, county planner during the initial design of the first plan, felt the process could have been more inclusive. "I'm sure some of the acequias have been left out," Miera said. He also lamented the lack of a funding mechanism to implement the projects.

Meanwhile, Chavez, who made the joke about growing hemp, struck a serious chord when asked about the process. "The people who are putting their 2 cents into this plan have no right to the water. Traditional users are not being represented in these meetings."

Sanchez, who said they didn't have to reinvent the wheel this time around, hopes to reach out to the community in a series of meetings about the plan.



The Taos Regional Water Plan update is a done deal.

Image courtesy State of New Mexico Interstate Stream Commission

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