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My Turn

Protect the sacred gift that flows from the mountains to people of Taos Valley

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Before the Anglos came, the Spanish people dug acequias by hand to carry water from the mountains to their fields. Before the Spanish people came, the people of Taos Pueblo diverted water to nourish their gardens for centuries. Before the people of Taos Pueblo, water flowed from the mountain and gave life to the plants, animals, and birds of the valley.

And now comes the behemoth Abeyta Settlement to apportion and divide the waters of the Taos Valley. Ninety-seven percent goes to the pueblo people (12,000 acre feet/year) and 3 percent goes to the acequias, the town of Taos, and everybody else (365 acre feet/year). It is good to honor the original water protectors with the lion's share of the water.

But to accomplish this, the Abeyta Settlement proposes that we pierce the earth with 13 or more 1,000-foot-deep wells close to where the waters emerge from the mountains and at locations throughout the valley. The Abeyta Settlement plans to re-pipe and re-plumb the entire valley with massive pumps whirring through the night, punching through the layered aquifers and bringing deep, ancient waters to the surface.

Of course, those wells and pipelines will be expensive — \$135 million. The electricity, the chemicals, treatment facilities and maintenance will be costly — \$50,000 to \$100,000 per well, per year. The deep waters may pull up heavy metals, calcium carbonate, and their alkaline chemistry may harm our alkaline soils. The deeper wells may even drain shallower domestic wells.

We've seen this movie before. In the 1920s the Middle Rio Grande Conservancy District was formed to make "improvements" on the irrigation system of Albuquerque's North Valley. Local Hispanic farmers rioted when they found out about it. When the Depression came in the 1930s these farmers couldn't pay the assessments required by these "improvements" and thousands lost their farms and water rights.

The people of the Taos Valley don't need or want most of these deep wells. Over a 14-year period, a handful of guys in a room negotiated this deal in secret with their lawyers. We have an historic system of ditches where we share the water and the work, where pure water flows from the mountains by gravity to our abundant valley. Almost no cash is required.

Why would we give up our elegant, historic, communal system for a system that is complicated, risky, and expensive? The water which flows from the mountains is a precious gift to the people of the Taos Valley. It is now up to us to work together to ensure a system of sharing the water that is worthy of that gift.

Bridgers lives in Arroyo Seco and is an acequia parciante.



Courtesy Doug Bridgers

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