

Traditional acequias vital in modern day

Staff report

The Taos News, 11 Apr 2019

Among the most beautiful sights and sounds of springtime is that of water flowing down the historic acequias winding across Taos County.

These historic irrigation ditches inform the heart and soul of the region. But as the people who care for them age and the society around them changes, they face neglect and abandonment.

For centuries, these irrigation ditches were lifelines for farmers and households. Crops, fruit trees and pastures depended on the water. A whole culture developed around acequias – how they were managed, how water was shared in dry times, when they were to be cleaned. The ditches were so important that they played a role in the New Mexico Constitution regarding water and who gets to use it first. They are the subject of songs, poetry, books and paintings.

One local acequia – the Vigil y Romo Acequia – that was dry and overgrown for 50 years was recently restored through the efforts of the Taos Land Trust, town of Taos, parcientes and volunteers. It was no small act of hope and confidence in the future to restore an irrigation ditch that might see fewer flows in the decades ahead as the full impacts of climate change hit.

Caring for these irrigation ditches is a time-honored spring tradition. Multiple generations of a family would walk the ditch, rakes and shovels in hand, to clean the acequias so water could freely flow. In some that is still the case; in others, as parcientes have aged and fewer family members are left to help out, they have hired others to clean the ditches. Still, it gets done every year. It must get done, to keep the acequias alive.

Property owners new to the area are sometimes startled by the appearance of parcientes in their back or front yards walking along, working the ditch. It is the ditch cleaners' right to do so in maintaining the acequias.

The politics of managing individual ditches can get gnarly, especially when there is drought. Layer on top of that fights over water rights, such as the one behind the Abeyta Settlement – a case that involved Taos Pueblo, dozens of acequia associations, the town of Taos and community water systems – and the complications increase ten-fold. (See our past coverage of Abeyta stretching back a decade at taosnews.com under the “Abeyta” tab.)

Parciantes will gather Saturday for the annual Taos Valley Acequia Association meeting at the Juan I. Gonzales Agricultural Center. In light of recent protests around a well associated with Abeyta and an increasing number of people, including parciantes, still questioning the water rights settlement, the leadership may once again need to explain the agreement's history and what comes next. Ignoring the questions and concerns may only haunt the agreement more as officials try to implement it.

The challenges to keeping acequias alive are many – political, social, economic and from climate change. The ditches may seem like an old-fashioned relic of the past, a slow-moving flow that has little place in a fast-paced technical world. But they are an efficient method for delivering water to orchards and fields. They water green belts that keep the valley green and sustain wildlife. And they are a reminder of how closely our lives and well-being are ultimately tied to nature and Earth. Caring for the acequias is a form of respect for that vital relationship, of our responsibility as stewards for the place where we live and which we love.