

Area legislators wade in to bolster acequia defense
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It's the Year of Water, as we hear incessantly from the governor's office -- but in arid New Mexico that has myriad meanings to our nearly two million people.

Take an important one-three-hundred-sixty-fifth of this year: Acequia Day, observed recently at the New Mexico Legislature.

Acequias, the irrigation ditches of our state, many of which go back to the earliest days of Spanish settlement, are the lifeblood of our land: Far more than mere waterers of crops, these painstakingly dug diversions from streams and rivers have become nurturers of the cottonwoods and other trees symbolic of the long history of this scenic terrain. They also contribute to aquifer-recharge and wildlife habitat.

They're what gave permanence to the villages, then towns, then cities -- and the families who forged them.

Today, agricultural life faces the pressures of population growth; of land development to accommodate that growth. Yet rural living goes on, its modern-day families still bound to the acequias they maintain, shovels in hand, in the manner of their forebears.

So when Sens. Phil Griego, John Grubestic and Carlos Cisneros of el norte, along with House Speaker Ben Luján of Nambé and Rep. Bobby Gonzales of Taos, addressed the New Mexico Acequia Association and others in a crowd of 450, they spoke from the heart to people who live and breathe with the water that burbles along the ditches they dig.

Those lawmakers are the leaders in endorsing an *agua es vida* declaration -- water is life. They're also advancing legislative proposals for state support of the legal tools it will take to keep the acequias flowing -- past the legal obstacles being built in the comfort of the corporate offices where water-seeking schemes are cooked.

An important part of the declaration is the longtime view that water is a communal resource attached to the land -- and that acequia water rights exist thanks to generations of labor and self-governance by the *parciantes* -- the members of ditch associations.

Luján and Cisneros are seeking an appropriation for acequia-governance courses, as well as technical help crucial to an overdue effort at formally organizing what for years have been ditches run mostly along the lines of village tradition. Now that water brokers are prowling the valleys seeking to buy up rights to acequia flows on behalf of suburbs and subdivisions downstream, the *parciantes* will need evidence that they're corporations-of-sorts, with standing to speak as groups.

And Griego is sponsor of Senate Bill 901, allowing domestic wells to be transferred to community-well systems. The measure is important to acequia organizations since the State Engineer's Office lately has issued rules raising ambiguities about such transfers -- at a time when acequias are offering greater cooperation with rural-community water systems.

We applaud our region's legislators for recognizing the value of acequias to New Mexico, the challenges posed by urban and suburban land speculation and the efforts being made to maintain the traditions of irrigation ditches, while keeping them contributing to the delicate ecology of our desert state.