

COMMUNITIES JOIN TO PROTECT WATER AND SUSTAIN RURAL LIVELIHOODS

BY BETH GRIFFIN

Family farmers and ranchers in arid New Mexico share scarce water resources using communal irrigation systems developed more than 400 years ago. They do not want to abandon a practice that has sustained their people for centuries.

Nonetheless, they are under distinctly 21st-century pressure to divert water to uses beyond agriculture and livestock, directly impacting their ability to maintain their land and livelihoods.

Seventeenth-century Mexican and Spanish settlers used gravity-fed ditches to carry water for drinking, farming, and watering livestock. Their traditional system resembled Native American water harvesting and irrigation techniques common in the Southwest for millennia. “Acequia” is a multipurpose word that describes both the earthen ditches and the small communities who depend on them.

An acequia, or series of ditches supplied by a single water source, can snake around and through the land of many families. Each family is allowed to divert an amount of water that is consistent with its needs to its fields. The determination of need and the schedule for supplying the water are governed by an oral tradition interpreted by an elected member of the acequia called the “mayordomo.”

There are more than 1,000 autonomous acequias in New Mexico, each with unique characteristics. All are guided by the principle of equity, according to Paula Garcia, executive director of the New Mexico Acequia Association (NMAA), which receives support from the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD).

“Water is so essential to life that it has to be shared in times of abundance and shortage,” she says. “The



Photos courtesy of New Mexico Acequia Association

Annual cleaning of the acequia.

community acequias are a rich part of the tapestry of local history and have sustained a food tradition that promotes sustainable farming and family well-being.”

Acequias vary in size, according to the water source and the topography. A small acequia might irrigate 25 acres and serve 3 families, while a large one could supply water to more than 100 families working 500 acres. All require collective labor to maintain the unimpeded flow.

“The acequias have to be cleaned every spring before the irrigation season, because they fill with silt, leaves, and debris,” Paula explains. “Everyone who has a right to use them sends a number of workers proportionate to his or her water rights. In recent years, we have seen a renewed interest in acequia cleaning as an expression of the revitalization of land-based cultures. People come back from the city to help, and everyone sees their neighbors.”

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FROM THE DIRECTOR

Brothers and Sisters,

I give thanks to my God at every remembrance of you, praying always with joy in my every prayer for all of you, because of your partnership for the gospel from the first day until now.



Reading for the Second Sunday of Advent (Phil 1:4-6)

During this season of Advent, we often find time to pause and reflect. My reflection is one of thanksgiving for your giving. On behalf of the thousands of lives that have been preserved, enhanced, and saved, I too pray with joy in my every prayer for you. Your faithful generosity to the Catholic Campaign for Human Development continues to offer hope in light of serious economic despair. Your generosity has provided families with a way to see beyond economic misery to lives of self-sufficiency and dignity.

I am indeed thankful for church leadership that understands and appreciates the gospel call to be in solidarity with those who struggle. I pray with joy and thankfulness for a marvelous CCHD staff whose unselfish kindness reveals itself in gentle listening and care. I am immensely appreciative for the thousands of you who share in the mission of Jesus by caring enough to share.

In this issue, we feature a CCHD-funded group in New Mexico working to secure water for irrigation. Using innovation that is more than 400 years old, families create ways to access water where it is most needed. Your generosity helped supply the water

that raised the crops,
that fed the families,
that nourished the schoolchildren,
that grew into contributing adults,
that built community.

We thank God for you!

Ralph McCloud
Director, Catholic Campaign for Human Development

What Is CCHD?

Through the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD), of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), Catholics and friends of CCHD across the country help poor and low-income Americans to help themselves and their communities out of poverty.

Since 1970, the Catholic Campaign has contributed over \$280 million to more than 7,800 low-income-led, community-based projects that strengthen families, create jobs, build affordable housing, fight crime, and improve schools and neighborhoods. CCHD requires that projects develop community leadership and participation so that their solutions to poverty will be long-lasting and effective, and so that CCHD's investment in people will help break the cycle of poverty. CCHD also educates Catholics about the causes of poverty and seeks to build solidarity between impoverished and affluent persons.

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break the cycle of poverty

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Paula says small-scale sustainable agriculture in New Mexico has been replaced in some places by families combining part-time farming and ranching with wage-paying jobs in towns and cities. It's still a tough life, with high rates of persistent rural poverty and limited job opportunities. Access to water for irrigation of crops and maintenance of livestock is essential to economic well-being. Low-income farmers and ranchers have the most to lose when water rights are diverted from agricultural use.

Many people still own the land that has been in their families for generations, says Paula, and that's a reason to be hopeful. "It's imperative for low-income families to retain land and water resources. It's important for those to pass [from generation to generation]. It promotes family well-being. That's what's at stake."

When New Mexico became a state in 1912, water rights were defined as individual private property that could be sold independently, subject to the control and jurisdiction of the state. "The acequias remained oblivious to this for two or three generations because there were no proposals to move water around," Paula says.

As the population grew in the 1980s, and as New Mexico welcomed industry, residential, and resort development, the state approved the transfer of water from agriculture to the resorts. This action was opposed by a dozen acequias who found out about the transfer through published legal notices.

If water is treated as a commodity, rather than a shared resource, rural communities are endangered. The acequia system relies on treating water as common property. "The idea that those with more money could own the water is antithetical to our value system," Paula says.

The New Mexico Acequia Association was established in 1990 as a united statewide voice to challenge the transfer of water rights without local approval. With some 4,000 members, the NMAA has helped acequias publish previously oral rules and regulations so they are recognized by the state. In 2003, it won legislation giving acequias the right to approve or deny water transfers in their communities.

"It's not an anti-transfer law, but one that supports local governance and gives priority to keeping water in agriculture or for some community benefit," Paula says.

She goes on to explain that the economic hardship of agriculture is the fundamental reason people sell or transfer their water rights. "We live in an economy that

values land and water for profit as opposed to sustenance. There's a scarcity of pretty green land. You can make a lot more money selling your land than farming it for 20 years."

But NMAA and its members believe that to ensure the future of their communities, they must hold on to the land and the water. "We're building the next generation of acequias. They're multigenerational, with a strong emphasis on community food projects," says Paula.

NMAA has an active youth and mentor system. If the next generation is in love with the land like its parents and grandparents, and if it understands the connection between access to the water and the ability to earn a just livelihood through farming and ranching, it will not be as likely to sell water and land for development, Paula says.


NMAA's work exemplifies CCHD's support not only for anti-poverty efforts to protect family farms, but also for the



Procession for the blessing of the water and land on Día de San Isidoro, May 15.

social-justice principles of community and the common good, empowerment, and low-income participation.

"The local CCHD gave us our first grant ever, at a time when a group like ours was seen as a risk by some other sources: we were all Hispanic; our leaders were from rural villages and counties and low-income communities. We didn't follow a conventional non-profit model."

Beyond the grants, Paula says CCHD's moral support and organizational model gave NMAA a huge boost. "We used the questions on the CCHD grant application as a framework for our organization. CCHD challenged us to focus on leadership development and institutional change and helped us develop in a healthy way. The local CCHD committee takes a sincere interest in our work, and that's a shot in the arm for us." 

NMAA MEMBER SNAPSHOTS



VICTOR MASCARENAS, 41, is a fifth-generation farmer in Urraca, in northeastern New Mexico. He grows alfalfa and raises cows on a 300-acre certified organic farm with his father, brother, nephew, and son. For five seasons, he was also the mayordomo of his acequia, which serves 42 parcels of land and irrigates 2,100 acres. He describes the position as “like a sheriff without a gun or a badge.”

Victor says that few of the families depend on the land for their entire livelihood. He says the NMAA offers “unbelievable resources” to help members protect water rights.

Victor is active with the NMAA youth group, hosting farm visits for students from the nearby town of Taos. He says it gives them a better appreciation for the land and the labor, especially when they see his young son operate heavy equipment.

GILBERT SANDOVAL, 74, is the mayordomo for two small acequias in central New Mexico, a position he has held for 35 years. He is a board member of NMAA and has worked closely to bring Hispanic and Native American farmers together to settle water disputes by mediation. He says NMAA “plays a vital role in protecting us from the influences that threaten our lifestyle.”

He sees urbanization as the biggest challenge to the acequias: “One hundred percent of our water is already appropriated. There is no extra. We can’t keep diverting agricultural water to industrial uses. I’d like to tell the state legislature that we can’t keep inviting guests to dinner when we don’t have any food left. Please bring people who can survive on sand!”



HOW YOU CAN HELP

You can donate your time, talent, and treasure to CCHD in many ways. Consider supporting CCHD with a stock donation or a matching gift from your employer, or remember CCHD in your estate planning.

For more information about CCHD, or to discuss ways to support our mission, contact Mary Mencarini Campbell at 202-541-3365 or mcampbell@usccb.org.

WHERE’S MY MONEY GOING?

All CCHD funds received are used solely for the support of CCHD’s anti-poverty mission. CCHD abides by the charitable standards set by a leading donor advisory service. Our funds are divided as follows: 89% is assigned to CCHD’s core program mission of community empowerment, economic development, education programs, and supporting services; 3% is allocated to coordinate the annual appeal; and 8% is assigned to administrative costs.

We thank you for helping to break the cycle of poverty through your ongoing support of CCHD.