

# Celebrando las Acequias 2013: A Summary Analysis

By Juan Estevan Arellano

Community Coordinator for the USEPA | NMED Watershed-based Planning Grant:

*"An Updated Watershed-based Plan for the Lower Embudo Watershed, New Mexico"*

## Overview

The sixth Celebrando las Acequias, an annual gathering "exploring land, water and culture in the Lower Embudo Valley," occurred on Saturday, July 13th, 2013. This year's Celebrando was different from the last three events in that it was smaller in scope, both in days and presentations. While the last three had scholars from throughout the nation as well as international experts on desert landscapes and irrigation, this year's event was intentionally kept to a maximum of 50 people and focused more on local acequia issues.

Since 2013 was one of the driest years on record through July, with only 1951 drier, the morning session focused on "Handling the Drought." As the Celebrando invitation stated, "Drought tests the limits of land, customs, patience and trust. It asks us hard questions, and requires that we take stock." Participants formed small groups, from five to a maximum of eight people. Most of the participants were from within the Embudo Watershed, especially from the lower Embudo, though there were also some students from the University of New Mexico, Taos campus.

Discussion was facilitated by Arid Lands Institute co-directors Hadley and Peter Arnold, who have worked with citizens of the Lower Embudo Valley for approximately ten years, Jan-Willem Jansens, of Ecotone, Santa Fe, an ecological landscape planning and consulting firm, and Estevan Arellano, community coordinator for the USEPA\NMED watershed-based planning grant and president of the Junta y Ciénaga acequia.

Four questions were asked during the morning session. This paper summarizes the responses generated and debated. Within these questions, three main themes were evident:

- (1) Engage Local Youth:  
Currently there is a lack of youth participating at any level in the acequia culture, except during the annual limpia (cleanup);
- 2) Sensitively Introduce New Technologies into a Traditional Culture:  
Within a traditional culture that has always relied on flood irrigation, place a priority on introducing and instructing parcientes with the uses of new technologies for reducing water use and increasing conservation;
- 3) Stop the Loss of Traditional Knowledge:  
The loss of or lack of reliance on traditional knowledge was evident this year during the repartimiento, or sharing of the water.

## Question 1: Is it worth it?

Why bother with the hard work of acequia culture?

What are the limits of our commitment to our place, our history, and our neighbors?

What are the payoffs?

In response to this question—is the hard work of maintaining the acequia way of life worth it?—“Yes” was the answer given by all. The reasons given for this commitment to acequia culture ranged from history (ancestral culture) to the future (resilience to climate change), and from social benefits (a land-based democracy) to environmental benefits (hydrology and habitat).

Participants noted that acequia culture is a privilege, and an inheritance of the hard work of our ancestors. In turn we have to be “good ancestors,” like those who came before us. The culture in itself unifies the community and if we don’t hold on to it, it will fade away. There has to be more acknowledgment of our ancestors who built and maintained these systems.

Some participants pointed out that acequias are local, land-based democracies, robust at a time when other forms of democratic practices are not thriving. Others noted that in a time of climate change, acequias have no need for fossil fuels. It’s a myth that fossil fuels give us more freedom and that we don’t need each other. Fossil fuels won’t last forever.

Participants saw the benefits of acequia culture as a good life for everyone, economically and culturally. Acequias also benefit the riverbed (the riparian habitat) and of course help maintain the culture and traditions.

What are the major concerns that limit effective management of the acequias, especially in times of drought? There was agreement that in times of feast all is well but in times of famine (crisis), disrespect shows its ugly head. The issues of greatest concern to the participants included:

- Respect Across Scales:  
There has to be respect for the small-time farmer, even the so called “hobby farmer” growing only for family use, because this creates solidarity and a tight community and without it, the integrity of the acequia system is undermined for all.
- The Importance of Participating in Maintenance:  
Some thought there has to be more spirit, or self-esteem and respect on the part of the parciantes and that outsiders should be welcomed and also taught about acequia culture. We must not forget that acequias have been here since the grant was made and many generations have survived because they have been maintained, something that is not happening today. This theme came across loud and clear: maintenance is a major challenge, one that is getting worse every year.
- Involving Youth:  
In years of drought, such as the past three, a major challenge has been the lack of maintenance and the lack of the younger generation participating. For acequias to continue, youth also have to learn to respect the acequia culture. One obstacle to greater participation

by youth is that only property owners can become parciantes, or water rights owners, in an acequia. This automatically keeps youth from becoming active participants except as peones (workers), since they don't own land.

- Water Rights:

The acequias benefit the whole community and one of the pay-offs should be the conservation of water for future generations. The question is: how do we conserve water for the future, since what is not used in the watershed flows downstream? What are the benefits? Where will it be stored and how? These are tough questions that need more scrutiny, dialogue, and eventually a consensus among those who own water rights.

For these concerns to be addressed, there has to be more active participation from the community at large.

## Question 2: What's not working?

What practices are making drought harder on you?

On your family?

On your neighbors?

This question gave participants an opportunity to look more closely at the limitations described in Question 1. Participants identified several pieces of the acequia system that are broken or in need of repair or maintenance. Some of those pieces are social or governance-related, for example, policy that needs clarification or enforcement. Others are physical, for example a technology that requires repair or development.

*On the social policy/governance side, several main concerns emerged. Almost all suggest a need for more education about how acequias work, and how they are governed. Many felt that some mayordomos lack understanding as to their duties and parciantes don't understand their role. This leads to scheduling difficulties, especially between the small versus large water users, making it difficult for people to work together. Lack of information leads to lack of communication, lack of involvement, and mismanagement. Specific concerns included:*

- Responsibility of Acequia Commissions to Know, Communicate, and Enforce Bylaws:

A major concern voiced was lack of enforcement of bylaws. Not too many people have seen copies of their acequia's bylaws and parciantes don't know the rules. This is especially true when it comes to the repartimiento or sharing of the water, which in 2013 lasted most of the irrigation season. Parciantes feel they don't know what process the commission follows during the repartimiento. *How is water sharing prioritized during the ripartimiento?* It is the responsibility of the commission to know this, communicate it, and enforce it.

- Responsibility of Parciantes to Know and Respect Bylaws:

Delinquencies—parciantes not paying their dues and not participating in routine maintenance—are also a major threat to acequias and there is little understanding or respect during repartimiento.

- Educating New Landowners:  
Participants stated that when newcomers don't understand the system, traditions are disregarded, with not much respect for acequia governance or for neighbors. There is a conflict between the drip and non-drip users (a difference in irrigation technique that often corresponds to newcomers versus traditional farmers). This became evident this year when those with drip irrigation wanted priority over those who flood irrigate because they say they use less water, overlooking that in the acequia system water rights are allotted based on the amount of land parciantes have in production. Drip irrigators or commercial growers need to be educated to understand that they do not have priority over "hobby farmers" in the acequia system. Lastly, there needs to be increased awareness of the relationship between acequia water and well water: lack of water in the acequias and lack of flood irrigation causes wells to go dry.
- Water Rights:  
Others see too much chaos on acequia water rights governance, too many inconsistencies, which creates problems for water rights holders. The community needs to work together, especially to anticipate water adjudication to avoid the problems facing Taos today.
- Youth Involvement:  
Again, how can young people be encouraged to become involved and help manage the system, both the traditional and evolving new culture? A mechanism has to be developed by which the young can get involved even if they don't own property. This may necessitate legislative changes.

The overriding concern about "what is not working" is a loss of communication and participation. This is ironic since today there are phones, the Internet and social media, yet parciantes don't communicate. In the past, the job of mayordomo was more hands-on, in that every parciante and acequia official met face-to-face to talk about water. Today, acequias are losing their importance and for some acequia culture is "evaporating like the water."

*On the question of the technical and physical aspects of acequias that need repair, people are concerned with water quality, ie, pollution—trash and sediment—and with water quantity, ie, how can we make our supplies more reliable and/or last longer? Both questions require improvements to physical infrastructures. Specific concerns included:*

- Ditch Maintenance  
Participants stated that more cleaning of the acequias has to happen between seasons, and also during the season. Lack of maintenance keeps coming up as an issue.
- Infrastructural Improvements:  
To improve water supply and storage, infrastructure needs to be upgraded. There is need for a water storage facility, maybe fishing lakes in the headwater to serve as a water reserve. The issue of ground water recharge is also a concern as it relates to drip and pump irrigation versus flood irrigation.

- Irrigation Techniques:  
It was acknowledged that there was much division between flood irrigators and drip irrigators. There is a lack of information about how to measure efficiency and a lack of understanding about how drip leads to a governance issues and infrastructure changes. It was agreed that dialog must be created and solutions found so both can co-exist. Things should be looked at collectively to arrive at solutions that benefit everyone.
- Habitat Management:  
Competing for water and undermining the banks, there are many invasive tree species along the acequias. Beaver dams impair flows, and the long acequias don't get water to the last parciante. There also seems to be an abundance of wildlife such as more gophers, rabbits and owls. This year also brought a lot of bears to the valley, in addition to mountain lions and in the Embudo area too many elk and deer that are destroying gardens and small trees.

### Question 3. What might work?

What am I open to trying?

Am I open to renewing old practices?

Am I open to trying new approaches?

There was strong consensus on the great need for raising acequia literacy, improving how we communicate about acequia life: explaining and enforcing the rules by which the acequias operate, socially and physically; creating dialog around new techniques so their impacts can be measured and evaluated; sharing ideas and case studies of techniques or practices that may be unfamiliar. Greater education and awareness will improve cooperation throughout the valley.

Raising acequia literacy can happen at a variety of levels:

- Orientation Sessions:  
One suggestion was to require new parciantes to participate in an orientation in order to create more trust and understanding. There has to be an effort to reach out and get to know newcomers and inform them of their role as a parciante and a member of the acequia community, sharing local knowledge and traditions. Perhaps a meal and awards recognition could revive annual meetings?
- Handbook: Acequia 101  
The idea of a handbook also came up, one for each acequia or a valley-wide one. It would include roles, responsibilities, definitions and explanations of traditions. This could be used by commissioners and parciantes, and could also be available when real estate is for sale, so that potential buyers are informed and understand the context in which the land operates before buying.
- Promoting Involvement Across Generations, Communities:  
The elementary school should include acequia practices in its sixth grade curriculum to teach students how to keep acequia banks clean. Acequias should work more closely with Picuris Pueblo and other institutions to share information based on informed studies. There

should be a program instituted to Adopt-An-Acequia to keep the banks clean or a barter system, a shared, collaborative system for exchanging labor. A newsletter where people can speak their mind and that is both practical and inspirational, including a kid's corner, is needed. There should be an internship program for youth to train commissioners and mayordomos. Acequias should get together during the winter, strengthening acequia associations to anticipate the issues. And to get out the word, establish a phone tree for individual acequias as well as valley wide.

In terms of exploring *new physical or technical approaches, or recovering old techniques*, community members named the following interests:

- Maintenance:  
In addition to more community involvement in maintenance, participants expressed interest in using more machinery.
- Ripartimiento:  
Some suggested a new experimentation with repartimiento. Some suggested using RAM to pump directly from the river. Others pointed out that this is illegal and would definitely destroy the acequias; the ones that would suffer would be those downstream. It's against state law to change the point of diversion, unless given permission by the State Engineer.
- Storage:  
Participants expressed interest in learning more about piped irrigation systems (including storage tanks), holding ponds, and upstream infiltration. There was also strong interest in taking advantage of water banking since it is estimated that at most 35 percent of the land is irrigated, leaving 65 percent fallow. We need to find out why parciantes don't irrigate or farm the land.
- Irrigation and Groundwater Recharge Research:  
There is a strong desire for more research on drip irrigation—the pros and cons. There has to be more dialogue about all methods of irrigation to learn more. There also has to be more listening. There is also a lack of measurement when it comes to water use.
- Habitat management:  
Active and persistent removal of invasive species and maintaining clean banks.

Participants suggested that with drip irrigation, alberca or storage ponds should be used. We have to look for what is compatible, though more studies might be needed as we transition from subsistence (sic) to new times (sustainable, permaculture, organic). Some proposed a meeting of the minds (workshop sponsored by NMAA) to discuss drip versus flood irrigation.

We need to look at the efficiency in water delivery, including brush removal, soil development, as there is a difference in water holding capacities in relation to upland, relation to recharge capacity. There is more need for mulching for greater consistencies in recharge. It was also mentioned in one of the tables that flood irrigation, especially after hundreds of years, has developed a soil like a sponge and when changed over to drip, which uses less water, the landscape will suffer.

#### Question 4: What do I need to be effective? How do I find out more?

Are there others who want to work with me on this?

How can I learn from others?

Where can I see examples or talk with someone who has experience?

Participants brainstormed on ways to support each other and all residents of the valley in adopting best practices to manage acequias, especially in times of drought. Many people expressed interest in looking at case studies, and taking advantage of local research underway or already completed.

Questions and suggestions included:

- Where can I find out more about the best ways to impound the spring runoffs or water from the arroyos?
- Where can I see the construction of an alberca, or holding pond, and how it works with drip irrigation?
- I understand that Acequia de la Plaza has experience in both flood and drip irrigation, gravity versus pump; how can I find out more about how that acequia is balancing them?
- Would it be possible to put together a tour of alternative building materials and a guide to all individual acequias and their most effective strategies?
- Are there examples (printed or online) of handbooks of acequia technology, acequia literacy (education) and agricultural related information?
- How do I find out how things were done manually in the past (traditional knowledge)?
- Could we publish an acequia resource list?
- How do I seek grants and service providers, including hydrological information?
- To promote biodiversity and water conservation, how do I find out what are the best seeds adapted to the area?
- Are there studies that measure the differences between flood and drip?  
The findings from Alcalde (NMSU) in terms of using appropriate technology, including interns and woofers with college credit should be instituted, even bringing foreign students (though there was no mention how they would be utilized).
- What else should my acequia look at?  
It was also suggested that Rio Arriba County has an ordinance in place and a watershed project in the Cebolla area, working with NRCS (Rio de las Nutrias) to promote the right system for soil conservation and productivity. Parciantes should also get a farm plan together with county conservationist based on soil types.

- How can I find out more about development rights?
- How can we encourage more creativity and fantasy, as well as reintroducing “la visita,” as part of improving the community’s mental health?
- A summary of this meeting should be provided to all participants.



## List of Attendees:

6<sup>th</sup> Annual Celebrando las Acequias  
 Saturday, July 13th, 2013  
 Dixon, NM

ACEQUIA	LAST NAME	FIRST NAME
Acequia de Alcalde	Sanchez	Lucia
Apodaca	Tafoya	Archie
Bosque	Cohen	Karen
Bosque	Rice	Harbert
Bosque	Templeton	Robert
Cañeda Ancha	Trujillo	Pilar
del Medio	Tucker	J.W.
del Medio	Vergara	Sylvia E.
del Medio/ La Plaza	Greenwald	Maggie
El Llano	Coburn	Marie
El Llano	Griego	Aaron
El Llano	Griego	Virginia
El Prado	Dennis	S
Garcha	Gonzalez	Don Diego
Junta y Cienega	Arellano	Estevan
Junta y Cienega	Romero	Clovis
La Plaza	Brenden	Marcia
La Plaza	Jaramillo	Yolanda
La Plaza	Jaramillo	Nick
La Plaza	Leonard	Leroy
La Plaza	Leonard	Shelby
La Plaza	Levit	Nancy
La Plaza	North	Roz
La Plaza	Prez	Aaron
La Plaza	Underwood	Cathy
La Plaza	Valdez	David
La Puebla	Walsh	Patrick
Los Salazares	Garcia	David
Sancochada	Ciddio	Joseph
Sancochada	Martinez	Elmer
Sancochada	Torres	Andy
	Arnold	Peter
	Arnold	Hadley

Arnold	Jerri
Bishop	Lindsey
Canty	Judi
Collier	Robin
Fowles	Severn
Gilheany	Emma
Hausdoerffer	John
Hill	Natalie
Jansens	Jan-Willem
Louis	Ceanne
Lovato	Rubin
Marrufo	Loretta
Martinez	Andrew
Martinez	Horacio
Matush	Mike
Osen	Lorenz
Raheem	Nejem
Rosenberg	Adrienne
Varos	Michelle

## Follow-Up Resources:

For residents interested in working together to respond to some of these suggestions, there are many resources, including the following:

### Resources, Organizations:

#### **Arid Lands Institute [ALI]**

@ Woodbury University  
7500 Glenoaks Blvd  
Burbank, CA 91510  
Phone (818) 767 0888 x335  
Hadley Arnold, Executive Director  
Peter Arnold, Research Director  
Email: hadley.arnold@aridlands.org  
Email: peter.arnold@aridlands.org  
Web: aridlands.org  
A Nonprofit Organization

Mission Statement: ALI's mission is to train designers and citizens to innovate in response to hydrologic variability brought on by climate change.

Vision Statement: ALI's vision is a water-smart built environment in the US West serving as a model for drylands globally.

ALI provides an open, lab-like platform for collaborators from multiple universities, serving as a resource for the academic, public, and private sectors. Critical thinking; design excellence for the public good; and hospitality to diversity, including a rich web of collaborative partnerships that reach across cultures, generations, and sectors, are central to ALI's programs and operations. ALI's mapping and modeling of Embudo Valley acequias supports commissioners in identifying critical needs and finding the financial and practical support to address them. ALI's Drylands Design Video Library hosts approximately 100 hours of talks by regional, national, and international leaders in drylands thinking. Trace Drylands Design talks chronologically from 2009 through the present, or choose a playlist sorted by theme, discipline, or speaker.

#### **Ecotone**

1413 Second Street, Suite 5  
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Jan-Willem Jansens, Principal  
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Email: jwjansens@gmail.com

Ecotone is a small consulting business based in Santa Fe, New Mexico. We provide services to landowners and land managers across northern New Mexico and beyond to create or maintain healthy, productive landscapes and insightful ecological stewardship by the primary users and decision makers. Ecotone offers ecological assessment, planning, monitoring, and stewardship education services, with an emphasis on comprehensive approaches to land and natural resource management. We lead landscape-wide conservation planning initiatives for the stewardship of wetlands, streams, stormwater zones, wildlife pathways, and other areas of significant conservation value. We coordinate planning, restoration, and stewardship programs of forests, woodlands, rangelands, stream corridors, wetlands, and backcountry trails. We also promote the development of practical educational materials and events to enhance community-based land stewardship.

**New Mexico Acequia Association**

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Santa Fe, NM 87505  
Phone (505) 995-9644  
Fax (505) 995-0097  
Web: lasacequias.org  
Paula Garcia, Executive Director.  
A Nonprofit Organization

Mission Statement: The mission of the New Mexico Acequia Association is to protect water and our acequias, grow healthy food for our families and communities, and to honor our cultural heritage.

Vision Statement: In our vision, acequias flow with clean water, people work together to grow food, and communities celebrate cultural and spiritual traditions. People honor acequias as part of our heritage and express *querencia* through a strong connection to land and community. Knowledge and experience about growing food, sharing water, and saving seed are passed on from generation to generation. Guided by our core values, the New Mexico Acequia Association grows a movement of people of all ages and walks of life to defend and protect our precious water by resisting its commodification and contamination. Through involvement in NMAA, families and youth are inspired to cultivate the land, care for our acequias, and heal past injustices. Communities have an abundance of healthy, locally grown food because we recognize agriculture as a respected and dignified livelihood and way of life.

**New Mexico Acequia Commission, under the Office of the State Engineer**

Ralph Vigil  
Email: molinodelaisla@gmail.com

New Mexico Acequia Commission was created in 1987 to advise the governor, the New Mexico Interstate Stream Commission and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers on what criteria should be used to determine priorities for rehabilitating acequias under a new federal funding program. The Acequia Commission was established by statute by the 1993 Legislature as an eleven-member commission serving four-year terms. The Acequia Commission was also charged with the duties of serving as a facilitator for communication between local acequia organizations and the state and federal governments, and for reviewing plans or legislation that affect acequias and presenting their findings to the governor and the New Mexico Interstate Stream Commission.

**New Mexico Department of Agriculture**

3190 S. Espina  
Las Cruces, NM 88003  
Phone (575) 646-3007  
Jeff M. White, Secretary

**New Mexico State University, Sustainable Agriculture Science Center @ Alcalde**

371 County Rd 40

P.O Box 159, Alcalde, NM

Phone (505) 852-0480

Email: [alcalde@nmsu.edu](mailto:alcalde@nmsu.edu)

Dr. Steven Guldan, Superintendent, Agronomist

Phone (505) 852-4241

This center is dedicated to research that will benefit small family farms of north-central New Mexico.

**Quivira Coalition**

1413 Second Street, Suite

Santa Fe, New Mexico 87505

Phone (505) 820-2544

Email: [admin@quiviracoalition.org](mailto:admin@quiviracoalition.org)

Web: [quiviracoalition.org](http://quiviracoalition.org)

Avery C. Anderson, Executive Director

Courtney White, Founder and Creative Director

A Nonprofit Organization

Mission Statement: To build resilience by fostering ecological, economic and social health on western landscapes through education, innovation, collaboration and progressive public and private land stewardship. Founded in 1997 by two conservationists and a rancher, the Quivira Coalition is a non-profit organization based in Santa Fe, New Mexico, dedicated to building economic and ecological resilience on western working landscapes.

**Santa Fe Watershed Association**

1413 Second Street, Suite 3

Santa Fe, NM 87505

Phone: (505) 820-1696

Felicity Broennan, Executive Director

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The Santa Fe Watershed Association works to return the Santa Fe River to a living river, from the headwaters in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains to the Rio Grande, balancing human uses with natural resource protection within the Santa Fe River watershed.

**Taos County Economic Development Corporation [TDEDC]**

1021 Salazar Rd. Taos, NM 87571

Phone: (575) 758-8731

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P.O. Box 1389, Taos, NM 87571

Pati L. Martinson & Terrie Bad Hand, Directors/Founders

Since Taos County Economic Development Corporation (TCEDC) was founded in 1987, the challenges facing our community were those of a historic, semi-isolated, rural area transitioning from a centuries old, self-sufficient agrarian base to a commercially focused economy. TCEDC has operated for over nineteen years utilizing a family model in its community development efforts to address these challenges. Our model builds upon the strengths and wisdom of land-based cultures that have demonstrated the ability to survive and overcome adversity by retaining beliefs and values and recognizing the inevitability of cycles. The vision, in essence, is a holographic view of the best or highest scenario of balance, beauty and potential.

**US Department of Agriculture, Natural Resource Conservation Services [NRCS]**

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**Resources, Embudo Valley Acequias \ 2013 Commissioners:**

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