



# Acequia AQUÍ

The history and  
preservation of the  
Acequia del Madre  
del Río Pueblo,  
Taos, New Mexico

A publication of  
The Paseo Project  
in support of the  
Friends of the  
Acequia Madre

The Paseo Project is excited to present *Acequia Aquí: The history and preservation of the Acequia Madre del Río Pueblo*. The essay and series of maps illuminate the deteriorating acequia network at the heart of the town of Taos. Through community collaborations, The Paseo Project seeks to educate, illuminate and support this historic and culturally important public infrastructure. Through this exploration, the Paseo Project seeks to transform our community by celebrating the downtown acequia network through creative and artistic events and installations. With the help of this booklet, we hope that you will better understand the history and value the acequia system has provided to our community and imagine with us new ways that we can celebrate the gift of their presence.

– The Paseo Project Team

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This project was made possible by the LOR Foundation  
in the support of the Acquia Madre del Pueblo.



We'd like to give special thanks to the following people:

Charles Chacon	J.R. Logan	Charles Chacon
Jim Schlarbaum	Gina Azzari	Barbara Scott
Sylvia Rodriguez	Eloy Jeantete	LOR Foundation
Juanita Lavadie	George Trujillo	Friends of the Acequia Madre
Judy Torres	Lillian Trujillo	Taos Valley Acequia Association

### THE PASEO PROJECT

The Paseo Project transforms art through community and community through art. The Paseo Project lives at the center of three primary values: Art, Education, and Community. The Paseo Project's community is both local and global, respectful and inclusive.

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"The Acequia Madre del Río Pueblo" by Sylvia Rodríguez, ©2018, Sylvia Rodríguez.

Maps compiled from Landsat/Copernicus Satellite imagery (Oct 2016) with design and input by J. Matthew Thomas, Gina Azzari, Sylvia Rodríguez and the Acequia Madre del Río Pueblo. Maps are copyright of The Paseo Project, ©2018.

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fact:

Always contact your  
Acequia Commission  
before making any  
major developments  
to your land.

# The Acequia Madre del Río Pueblo

Sylvia Rodríguez

No one knows who dug the first acequias in Taos—nor how, nor when, nor in what order. One of the first things Spanish colonial settlers did was construct a *presa*, or stream diversion, and dig an acequia. This task was not usually recorded. The two earliest *mercedes*, or land grants, in Taos claimed lands within the Río Fernando, Lower Río Pueblo, Río Lucero, and Río de Las Trampas (Río Grande del Rancho) watersheds. Acequias on all these streams would have operated from the early 17th century until 1680, when *vecinos* fleeing the Pueblo Revolt abandoned them for about 12 years. Returning settlers restored the acequias, dug new ones, and gradually extended their reach across the valley. Post-Revolt grants included the La Serna (1710), Gijosa (1715), and Lucero de Godoy (1716), all encompassing previous grant lands along the aforementioned streams. The earliest recorded date for an acequia in Taos is 1715 for the Lovatos on the Gijosa, which diverts off the lower Río Pueblo in Upper Ranchitos.

By the late 1700s, half a dozen settlements had coalesced along the streams on lands surrounding Taos Pueblo. The Pueblo resides on the north and south banks of the upper Río Pueblo and commands upstream access and first priority to its waters, which originate in Blue Lake, high in the mountains between Taos Mountain and Wheeler Peak. In 1796, the colonial governor issued the Fernando de Taos land grant to about 60 families living on the north and south sides of the Río Fernando. The next year, they petitioned the *alcalde* (mayor) for *sobrante*, or surplus, water rights from the ríos Pueblo and Lucero. Construction of the Acequia Madre del Río Pueblo (AMRP) may therefore have followed or coincided with the Acequias Madre del Norte and del Sur near Cañon. Likewise the Acequia Madre del Río Lucero, near Los Estiércoles, or El Prado. The mingling of these stream waters—through irrigation, subsurface confluence, and percolation into the aquifer—generates the meadows, farmlands, and fertile greenbelts of the Taos Valley. A 1797 census identified six *placitas* in Taos, each named for its patron saint: Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe (the town of Taos), NS de Dolores (Cañon), La Purissima Concepción (Upper Ranchitos), San Francisco de Pauda (Lower Ranchitos), San Francisco de Assisi (Ranchos), and Santa Gertrudis (unknown).

The Río Pueblo sobrantes, granted in 1797, gradually morphed into regular water rights as agriculture intensified and the non-Indian population grew. By the latter 1800s, litigation had erupted between downstream irrigators and Taos Pueblo during times of scarcity. AMRP *parciantes* were allocated two *surcos*, but by 1893 a temporal rotation was agreed upon that is still in place today: during low flow, the town irrigators get the whole river for three days a week while the pueblo closes its gates from Friday evening until Monday morning. During times of high or average flow, there is enough for everyone (including downstream acequias) during the week, subject nonetheless to cooperative turn-taking.

## The Acequia Madre del Río Pueblo, cont'd

During the first half of the 20th century, the fields and orchards surrounding Taos Plaza gradually became residential properties served by a well-maintained network of laterals. Around World War I, the plaza itself was irrigated by a gated wood-lined acequia that flowed south under Paseo del Pueblo Norte. But in the latter half of the century, the town's irrigated properties were gradually choked off and buried by the relentless push to modernize. Little by little, verdant fields, orchards, meadows, pastures, and wetlands were filled in or plowed under into standard urban blocks covered by residential subdivisions and bordered by sidewalks and paved streets.

The *compuerta*, or headgate, for the Acequia Madre del Río Pueblo sits on Taos Pueblo land about a mile and a half above Sierra Vista cemetery, near the boundary between the reservation and the town of Taos. Below the crumbling east side of the cemetery, just above the former Lineberry estate, a second compuerta diverts water into the Loma Arriba lateral. The Loma lateral winds around the west side of town toward La Loma and Ranchitos. The AMRP continues around the east side of the town toward Cañon, where it crosses the Acequias Madre del Río Fernando del Norte and del Sur, then wends its way southwest toward La Posta, where the first hospital once stood. Two more laterals branch off the AMRP to the southwest: the Kit Carson, which runs through Kit Carson Park, and the Los Pandos, which serves neighborhoods southeast and southwest of the plaza. These laterals themselves sprouted *linderos*, or sublaterals, which ran between properties throughout the town but have now disappeared. Their names are forgotten. They began to disappear in the late 1960s as the Town of Taos allowed them to be paved over. Residents gradually stopped irrigating and transferred their surface rights to the Town in exchange for hookups to the new municipal water system. Vanishing traces can still be found along Paseo del Pueblo Norte, Camino de la Placitas, Ojitos Road, and Lund, Valverde, Ledoux, and Bent streets.

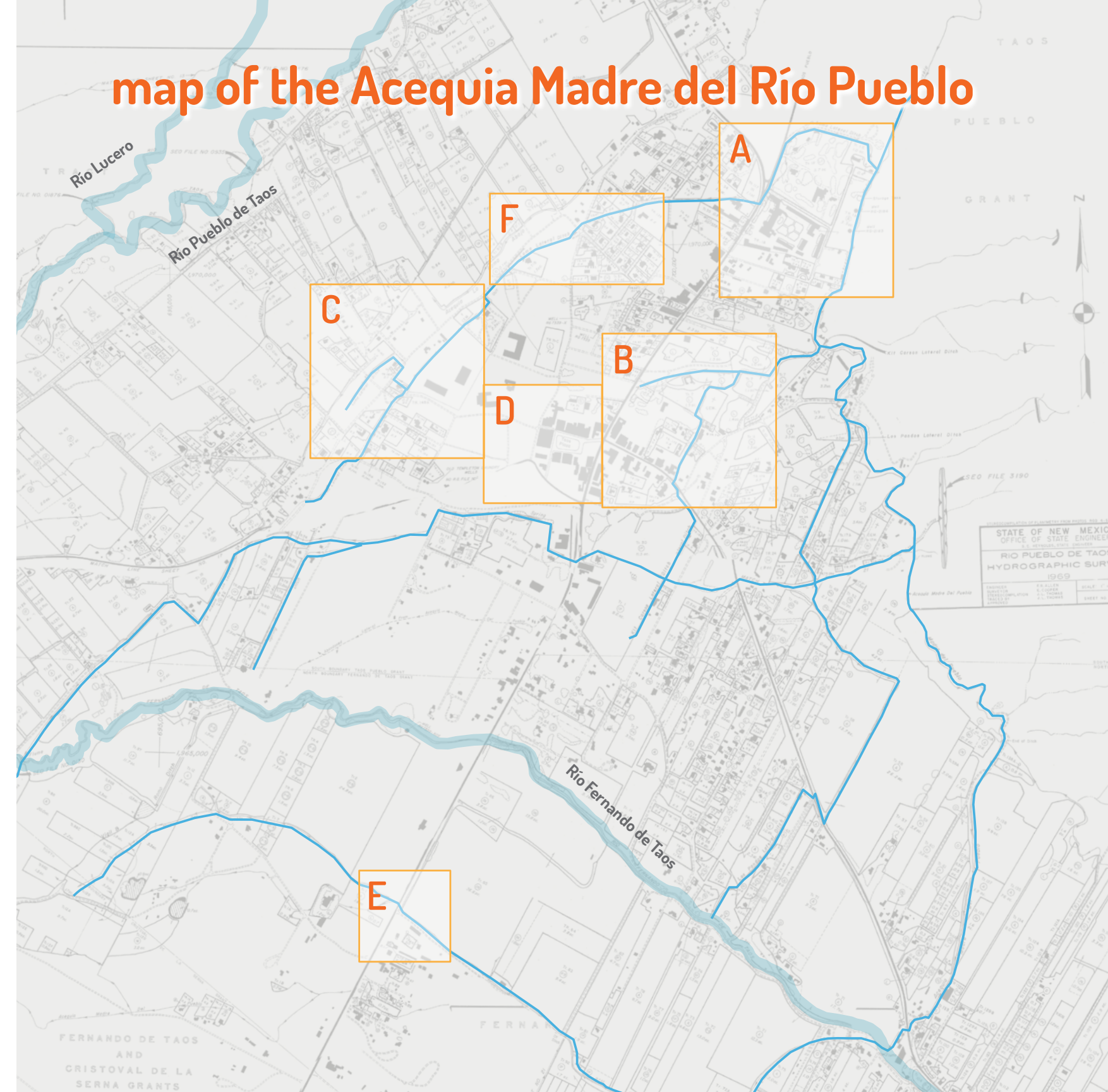


### faces of the acequia Eloy Jeantete, Parciante

“When I was young, I used to get the water from the acequia at night when the people from the Pueblo would allow us to irrigate. Most everyone in La Loma had a garden. So it’s in my veins. I grew up with it. It’s a way of life. Seeing the water flowing through your property, and seeing people using it, it’s a blessing.”

*Background map:  
State of NM Office of State Engineer.  
Rio Pueblo de Taos Hydrographic Survey, 1969.*

## map of the Acequia Madre del Río Pueblo



## The Acequia Madre del Río Pueblo, cont'd

Many of these town acequias were still running when I was a child in the 1950s. Today it is hard to imagine how an intricate network of ditches once ran alongside the town streets and through peoples' yards, where they irrigated vegetable and flower gardens, orchards, milpas, and lawns. Every yard had little wooden compuertas that channeled the water in different directions. Ditchwater overflowing into the street or flooding a basement was commonplace.

I grew up on the corner of Placitas and Lund. Our acequia diverted off La Loma lateral, west of highway 68, and flowed south along Placitas. Right at our corner, the acequia divided into western and eastern branches. One flowed down a little hill and southwest along Valverde Street to La Loma. Below the hill was a lush wetland teeming with birds and frogs, crossed by laterals running toward Ranchitos. Today it suffocates under a residential subdivision. The other branch entered our yard at the northwest corner, flowed east along the fence, and into neighboring properties facing Lund.

Cottonwoods, spirea bushes, and lilacs bordered the ditch in our yard. One section was overgrown and dark. Another stretch had smooth open banks where I built little adobe villages surrounded by miniature gardens, fields, trees, and corrals. This lindero was my Amazon—the magnetic center of long summer days, the pulsing source of my feral imagination. Its springtime eruption into the yard announced the arrival of outdoor freedom. The acequia was the green internet of its day, connecting you in real time to every other property and irrigator, registering changes in volume, sound, weather, and the hour, swiftly carrying little wood-chip boats past the jungle village, suddenly coughing up a rubber ball or other escaped article from upstream, even a fish or a terrified baby bird. Irrigation turned our yard into a glistening shallow lake, where blackbirds fluttered and robins pulled up worms. Without water, the acequia became an irresistible pathway to explore, luring me under fences and through the underbrush in peoples' yards, winding across neighborhoods all the way up to the main compuerta at the edge of town.



### faces of the acequia

**George Trujillo, Parciante, Former Mayordomo**

"I was mayordomo for close to 20 years and I loved the work. I loved to be there early in the morning, hearing the birds, messing with the water, messing with the people. And I had a lot of good friends who would help me out. They were all my buddies. We had a lot of fun."



**Fact:**

"Acequias, or community ditches, are recognized under New Mexico law as political subdivisions of the state. Many Acequia associations have been in existence since the Spanish colonization period of the 17th and 18th centuries. Historically, they have been a principal local government unit for the distribution and use of surface water."

From Code of the West: "CODE OF THE WEST" OR "How to Avoid Surprises and Be a Good Neighbor When You're Buying, Building, and Developing in Taos County" A publication adapted from the Santa Fe County Board of Commissioners and revised by the Taos County Cooperative Extension Service Advisory Board.

## The Acequia Madre del Río Pueblo, cont'd

Today, the AMRP system is a tattered skeleton of what it once was. At the epicenter of urban development and demographic change for over a century, town acequias are the most ravaged of the entire basin. Most newcomers and townies under 50 have no inkling of what was once there. They are unaware of the hidden world of hydraulic connectivity that perseveres among remaining parciantes struggling to maintain endangered laterals and irrigate a shrinking land base. Of about 150 to 200 parciantes on the books, one source estimates at least 50 still irrigate—or would like to if they could get water. The town is a checkerboard of previously irrigated, now desiccated, urban plots. Many have lost their water rights forever. Others may retain rights but cannot irrigate because their canals are unusable.

But at this 11th hour, new hope seems to arise. Having finally recognized the error of its ways, the Town of Taos has recently undertaken to support and protect surviving acequias and even to restore disused laterals within its boundaries. The LOR Foundation is supporting this effort, plus another project to restore acequias on the Río Fernando. Restoration of infrastructure is necessary but only part of the picture; good governance is the other part. Without it, infrastructure is little more than a relic. Governance requires participation, adherence to custom and law, and the fair and equitable sharing of water.

Whether or not the laterals in town can be revitalized is therefore also up to property owners. Are they active parciantes? Do they know their bylaws? Are the records up to date? Do they even know if their property has surface rights or harbors an old ditch? What about their neighbors? Is a water right merely a dollar value to them? Or is it a rare and precious opportunity to participate in a living acequia community, an authentic traditional system for managing water as a commons? **Membership is a privilege, a responsibility, an obligation. Educate yourself and step up to respect and protect the acequias of Taos.**



### faces of the acequia Lillian Trujillo, Parciante

“My dad was literally on his deathbed and he told me, ‘Mi hijita, you make sure you keep paying your water rights.’ Because the acequia is our lifeline. And it belongs to everybody. It’s not just for us to plant. It’s for the trees. It’s for the aquifer. It’s important for all of Taos.”



**fact:**

Acequias also have the right to gain access to the ditch through traditional points of access, even when that includes crossing a person’s property. The easement rights include the right to make reasonable improvements and maintenance to the Acequia. This also includes the use of machinery. If your property includes a historic Acequia you may also own the water rights associated with Acequia. Contact the respective Acequia commission and or mayor-domo for more specifics about your rights and Acequia traditions.

From Code of the West: “CODE OF THE WEST” OR “How to Avoid Surprises and Be a Good Neighbor When You’re Buying, Building, and Developing in Taos County” A publication adapted from the Santa Fe County Board of Commissioners and revised by the Taos County Cooperative Extension Service Advisory Board.

## acequia timeline

Thousands of years ago farmers in the arid Indus Valley of South Asia developed a simple, gravity-driven irrigation system based on the human circulatory system.

**711-1492** The Moors of North Africa conquer and occupy Spain and Portugal, bringing with them the Indus irrigation system they now refer to by the Arabic word 'as-saquiya'

**1000-1500** Pueblo Indians in arid New Mexico develop elaborate irrigation systems at Chaco Canyon, Zuni and throughout the Río Grande Valley

**1598** Irrigation traditions from South Asia and North America converge with settlers from the Juan de Oñate expedition build the first Hispano acequia near the confluence of the Río Chama and Río Grande

**1610** As the town of Santa Fe is founded, acequias retain their autonomy as local governments distinct from municipalities.

**1797** Priority date for the Acequia Madre del Río Pueblo

**1848** US conquest takes the region from Mexico; occupation force preserves the acequia system and the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo protects property rights of Mexican citizens, including acequia water rights

**1851** New Mexico territorial government enacts water laws that preserve acequia water-sharing customs and management practices

**1891** Water rights granted by Spain and Mexico survive the Court of Private Land Grant Claims, but 94 percent of Hispano land grants are lost

**1898** Territorial Water Commission concludes that the acequia system is 'just and progressive and simple' and should not be changed

**1907** The Territorial Water Code recognizes acequias as a distinct class of water rights protected by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and governed according to Spanish and Mexican water law and local custom.

**1912** The New Mexico State Constitution confirms all pre-existing water rights

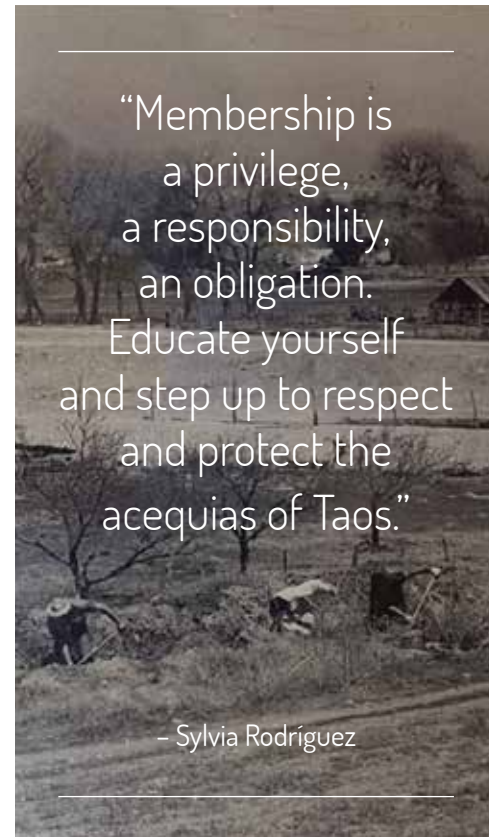
**1956-1990's** State of New Mexico files a series of acequia adjudication suits, threatening the validity of existing water rights and continuity of the acequia system

**Today** Maintain your acequia, pay your dues, protect your water rights!

*Content courtesy of the Taos Valley Acequia Association & The New Mexico Acequia Association*



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"Membership is a privilege, a responsibility, an obligation. Educate yourself and step up to respect and protect the acequias of Taos."

- Sylvia Rodríguez

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## C | La Loma Lateral



**fact:**

According to many acequia bylaws, acequia members are required to provide laborers as part of their responsibility to the acequia.

**acequia**  
(pronounced As-SAY-kee-ah)  
communal, gravity-fed irrigation system, believed to have been derived from Arabic word "As-Saqiya" (water carrier or quencher of thirst), its root "saqa," meaning "to irrigate"

**acequia madre**  
main (mother) irrigation ditch from which property owners receive irrigation water.

**bordo**  
sides of acequia right-of-way, the 'borders'

**compuerta**  
headgate

**desagüe**  
channel to return water to the original stream source

**"la limpia de la acequia", "sacando la acequia", "la fatiga"**  
cleaning of the ditch

**lindero**  
a small ditch that defines a boundary between two parcels of land

**mayordomo**  
ditch boss, ditch-master, makes decisions about water distribution with the consent and advice of the members.

**milpa**  
a corn field

**pala**  
shovel

**parciantes**  
landowners with water rights

**peónes**  
laborers, ditch cleaners/workers

**presas**  
diversion dams, also called atarques

**querencia**  
love of homeland

**regar**  
to irrigate

**repartimiento**  
custom of sharing within each acequia and between acequias on the same stream

**sangrías** (venitas)  
lateral ditches

**surco**  
a traditional unit of measurement for irrigation water, commonly understood as the amount of water that can pass through the hub of an ox cart wheel placed at the mouth of a ditch

**tarea**  
(an assignment of) an eight to twelve-foot segment of a ditch

share your stories

#AcequiaAqui



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## faces of the acequia

**Charles Chacon, Parciante, Commission Chairman**

"When I was a kid, the water would run right through town. My goal is to see that water run there again, so people can see it, learn about the culture, and get inspired to protect and help out the rest of our acequias. You hear the water running, and you can't help it. You love it."

D | Taos Plaza map:  
Ralph Meyers, *Map of Fernandez de Taos, Years 1845-1875, 1944.*



fact:

Acequias have easements that date back several hundred years. According to New Mexico State Law, an Acequia has a legal easement as long as it has been used historically, since its establishment. Acequia easements exist because of historic use. No legal document is required that establishes that right.

From Code of the West: "CODE OF THE WEST" OR "How to Avoid Surprises and Be a Good Neighbor When You're Buying, Building, and Developing in Taos County" A publication adapted from the Santa Fe County Board of Commissioners and revised by the Taos County Cooperative Extension Service Advisory Board.

# Acequias: Know the Code

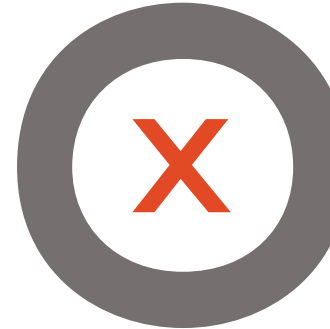
Fences, hedges, walls or landscaping are not permitted within the acequia setback without the written permission of the applicable acequia Commission having authority and must contain an operable gate or other acceptable access through the barrier wide enough to permit acequia maintenance.

No solid waste, debris, contaminant, substance, run-off, obstruction or barrier shall be directed, placed or permitted to enter into an acequia system at any point, or allowed to create a barrier to the flow, operation or maintenance of the acequia network.

The required minimum setback from the edge of the acequia network shall be ten feet (10') from the edge of the acequia or the maintenance easement specified within the by-laws of the Acequia Commission of jurisdiction or any other applicable easement as established by law.



How can we educate, illuminate, and celebrate our historic acequias?



## A call for creative ideas

Open to all artists, writers, environmentalists and water lovers

Submit your ideas on how to transform our community and share the historic and cultural traditions of the Acequia Madres del Rio Pueblo for generations to come.

- Illuminate the acequia network
- Express the history and culture of acequias
- Visualize the environmental impacts of water

Learn more at [paseoproject.org/acequia-aqui](http://paseoproject.org/acequia-aqui)

Contact us at [paseo@paseoproject.org](mailto:paseo@paseoproject.org)



Crosswalk by the Lake, Lake Austin Blvd, Austin, TX.



Visualization: Acequia 'light rods' in Kit Carson Park, Courtesy of Studio Taos



Visualization: Paseo Del Pueblo Sur, "Acequia Pins," Courtesy of Studio Taos



# FRIENDS OF THE ACEQUIA MADRE

Honoring Culture. Building Community.



## The Mother Ditch

The Acequia Madre del Río Pueblo encircles the heart of Taos, winding its way for more than five miles from Taos Pueblo, skirting the downtown and swooping through Cañon on its way to Fred Baca Park. It is a critical artery that spreads water across the valley floor making the Taos Valley the high-desert oasis we all love.

But the acequia is under threat.

Fifty years ago, the Acequia Madre irrigated more than 480 acres in and around the town, nourishing trees and aquifers along the way. But as Taos became more urbanized, sections of the ditch were plowed under, paved over and pushed aside. Poor development patterns broke links in the acequia system and left irrigators without access to water. At the same time, residents have become less and less reliant on the acequia for growing a garden to feed their families.

Today, most people with water rights on the Acequia Madre no longer irrigate. Fewer are paying their annual dues or showing up for the annual ditch cleaning day.

**You can help keep the water flowing: become a friend of the Acequia Madre.**

donate to the ditch

To learn more about ways to support the Acequia Madre, visit:

**[www.acequiataos.com](http://www.acequiataos.com)**

The Friends of the Acequia Madre and their website ([www.acequiataos.com](http://www.acequiataos.com)) was created and is maintained by the commissioners of the Acequia Madre del Río Pueblo.