



How New Mexico Policymakers Have Learned from Community Perspectives on Water Management

Elise Trott Jaramillo, Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation

Every autumn for the last fifteen years, small farmers, ranchers, gardeners, and environmental activists in New Mexico convene the annual *Congreso de las Acequias* – the Acequia Congress. This event celebrates and defends communally managed irrigation ditches called *acequias* that are the lifeblood of the region's agricultural communities. In 2012, the recently appointed State Engineer gave the keynote address. He presented a pie chart of water usage in New Mexico and outlined new procedures that he promised would honor the centuries-old tradition of community managed acequia irrigation. On the surface, his remarks seemed both friendly and respectful – yet there was an undercurrent of dissatisfaction in the audience, with shaking heads and complaints that the speech was “nonsensical,” “insulting,” and “intolerable.”

Why was the State Engineer's apparently inclusive approach greeted with such displeasure? As my research shows, this event encapsulates a clash of perspectives between those who measure water as a marketable commodity and those who understand water use in local contexts. It turns out that current scientific and anthropological research is increasingly validating long-held popular ideas about water as a natural resource best managed in local ecological context.

Water Management in New Mexico

Spurred by state management and adjudication of water rights, small New Mexico communities, including those peopled by indigenous groups and by *Nuevomexicanos* of Spanish and Mexican descent, have mobilized since the 1960s to defend the water rights of mostly poor and rural farming communities. With water an increasingly scarce and coveted resource in the arid Southwest, political and economic decision-makers often lean toward addressing the water demands of urban and industrial developers. Nevertheless, acequia users and organizers have had some success in making their voices heard. In 2003, they were instrumental in passing a Water Transfer Law that requires community associations to approve any applications to shift water rights away from local ditches. In the same year, the state legislature also approved “water banks” that allow unused water rights to be saved for use by other irrigators along the community ditch. These efforts have sustained traditions of local water management. When, as the old saying goes, “water flows uphill to money,” rural and disadvantaged communities are the first to dry up. But the efforts of New Mexico acequia organizers and users have shown that marginalized communities can help shape state policies and keep many such communities irrigated, thriving, and green.

Community Voices and Situated Knowledge

Ongoing ethnographic research highlights the specific knowledge acequia users have developed in their cultural, geographic, and economic contexts – and the innovative ways they inject what they know into larger public discussions in New Mexico and beyond. Through long experience, these communities have gained sophisticated understandings of the environment and natural resources – not only technical knowledge, such as how to flood a field from a gravity-fed ditch, but also understandings of the spiritual, social, and ecological significance of water. Researchers who watch and participate in community-based practices are best situated to understand what these communities know and have to offer to discussions in academia and public policy circles. Such researchers can use what they learn to help local communities break out from marginalization and lack of representation in official decision-making. Including community voices and drawing on traditional knowledge is not just a matter of social justice – this step also allows policymakers to gain insights they might not otherwise have. In New Mexico, policymaking for water transfer and water banking legislation is a good example: these state laws embody innovative responses to challenges of water scarcity and the endangerment of rural farming communities that would not have been possible without models from traditional community water management. Once tapped and appreciated, traditional knowledge contributed to innovative modern legislation.

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From this perspective, we can see what the 2012 *Congreso* standoff between the State Engineer and the community ditch users was really about. The State Engineer was trying to assure community ditch users of their equal *inclusion* in the state's water economy, but the acequia users were in fact asserting their *exclusion* from that economy. One farmer critic strongly objected to the State Engineer's pie chart, which depicted agriculture as accounting for 77% of water usage throughout the state. In the critic's view, this pie chart wrongly suggested that small-scale flood irrigation employed by acequias was comparable to water consumption for municipal or industrial use. Gravity-fed ditches, he argued, do not consume the water supply; they improve and replenish it by feeding the aquifer and nourishing riparian growth and wildlife. Interestingly, such claims about the benefits of gravity-fed ditch irrigation have recently been confirmed by ecological and hydrological research in the region.

Current studies lend scientific credence to long-held community beliefs that not all forms of water use fit within a market-based logic of consumption. Traditional perspectives call into question the wisdom of treating water as a commodity to be bought and sold separate from situated lands and lives nourished by water from specific sources. In fact, the knowledge of community ditch users shows the value of a holistic and context-specific approach to water management. And such knowledge can offer insights of great value to policymakers who look for new solutions that privilege community and environmental health rather than simple economic gain.

Arguments over water management in New Mexico thus underline the value of ideas from traditionally disempowered communities. Effective state water management strategies can draw inspiration from local, decentralized, and sustainable practices. Water banks can help, and so can elected rather than appointed water boards that solicit local input and minimize the sway of powerful corporate interests. By employing these strategies, policymakers can not only enhance democracy in natural resource management; they can also adapt longstanding indigenous practices to fashion innovative ways to protect natural resources and their local users.

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