



RIO GRANDE BASIN ROUNDTABLE NEWSLETTER

VOL 1 . ISSUE 2

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- Article: The way of Acequias

WELCOME!

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON THE RIO GRANDE ROUNDTABLE, VISIT RGBRT.ORG

YEAR IN REVIEW

As 2016 ends and the future continually knocks on our door, the Rio Grande Basin Roundtable can be proud of the work accomplished. We have always put forward good and needed projects for our water users. Whether they be consumptive oriented or non-consumptive, I have been impressed with the commitment to form multi-use partnerships in our basin. We have no apologies to make; the partnering with federal, state, and local agencies is becoming the norm here.

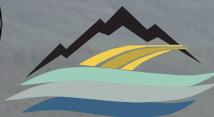
There is a very good feel to what we do here in the Rio Grande! I applaud all of you who are involved in any way with our watershed's issues. My feelings now are what we stated to the legislators who toured our Valley this summer, "you see we have an important past, but we hope more importantly, you see our future."

Sincerely,
Nathan Coombs
Chair

UPCOMING EVENTS

NEXT MEETING:

January 10, 2016
2 pm
SLWCD Office
623 Fourth St
Alamosa, CO 81101



The Rio Grande Basin Roundtable is partnering with the Colorado Ag Water Alliance to host:

THE RIO GRANDE BASIN AG PRODUCERS' WATER FUTURE WORKSHOP

WORKSHOP

February 28, 2017

10:00 AM - 2:00 PM

Rio Grande Water Conservation District
8805 Independence Way
Alamosa, CO 81101

For more information, visit rgbirt.org
or contact: Judy Lopez at (719) 580-5300 or Helen Smith at hssissy@gmail.com

PRAIRIE DITCH TOUR

Helen Smith

On Wednesday, October 19th, 2016, the Rio Grande Roundtable in conjunction with the Rio Grande Headwaters Restoration Project and the Prairie Ditch Company held a tour of the Prairie Ditch Project. Roundtable members heard from Emma Reesor, executive director for the Rio Grande Headwaters Restoration Project, and other project partners as they spoke about the project. Emma highlighted the beneficiaries of the project, including Prairie Ditch irrigators, landowners, farmers, ranchers, recreators, special districts, Rio Grande County, State and Federal agencies, wildlife and aquatic habitat. She also discussed the long list of project partners: The Prairie Ditch Company Board, the Rio Grande Roundtable (CWCB WSRA Basin and Statewide Account), and the Rio Grande Headwaters Restoration Project, the NRCS, Riverbend Engineering and Robins Construction.

This project not only replaced a disfunctioning diversion dam and headgate, but also included fish passage and stabilization of the riverbank to improve the riparian area and reduce sediment loading.

“an example of what can take place through collaboration and cooperation.”

Heather Dutton, Manager of the San Luis Valley Water Conservancy District, shared further details about how funding for the project was secured through the CWCB and the Rio Grande Roundtable. Prairie Ditch Company Board Members also provided input, regarding the many benefits the project has produced. Travis Smith, basin CWCB representative commended the completed project. The Prairie Ditch Project is an example of what can take place through collaboration and cooperation. ■



Completed Prairie Ditch Project dam at low flow. Photo: Emma Reesor.

UPDATE ON FUNDING

Basin Account Balance:
\$345,156

Statewide Account Balance:
\$2.18 Million

To learn more about the Water Supply Reserve Account Grant (WSRA) funding, visit:

<http://www.rgbrt.org/wsra-grants.html>



Low flow channel seen in winter conditions. Photo: Emma Reesor.



Emma Reesor presenting to the group at the Prairie Ditch Project tour. Photo: Helen Smith.

LINK TO ARTICLES, RADIO SPOTS AND VIDEO VIGNETTES:

Please visit <http://www.rgbrt.org/education-and-outreach.html>

THE WAY OF ACEQUIAS

Helen Smith

In the small community of San Luis, Colorado, a tradition that spans over 200 years continues-Acequias. Water is life to the acequias that exist in the southernmost part of the state which includes Conejos, Costilla, Huerfano, and Las Animas Counties. Those who adhere to the Acequia water sharing practices firmly believe that is a solid, communal, and democratic process of water sharing that has withstood the test of time. The Spanish word acequia comes from Classical Arabic "asaqiya" which means water conduit. Most acequias are simple open ditches with dirt banks. The majority are maintained by hand, with annual acequia cleaning days, which are still in practice today by the landowners and their families.

"Acequia agroecosystems" promote soil conservation and soil formation, provide terrestrial wildlife habitat and movement corridors. They protect water quality and fish habitat and ensure water quantity by providing a mechanism for recharge.



Eugene Jacquez, roundtable liaison for the Sangre de Cristo Acequia Association, landowner on the Acequia del Cerro ditch. Photo: Christi Bode.

In recent years Colorado acequias have successfully developed and implemented changes in state water laws, that meet unique customs and practices of the acequia systems. The traditional practice of the acequia is older than the Doctrine of Prior Appropriation, and the rules promulgating acequia water celebrate a rare instance of water pluralism in the context of western states water law. (see Hicks and Pena 2003). The Doctrine of Prior Appropriation is based on the idea of "first in use, first in right." Under this doctrine, water rights can be sold separately from the land. Acequias incorporate not just priority, but equity. The acequia system prohibits the transfer of water from the watershed where it is found. This means that it stays with the land as an in-place asset. The acequia system is also about each individual community working together to solve problems and preserve a heritage for the future.

Junita Martinez, secretary of the Sangre de Cristo Acequia Association explains that acequias have been a way of life for San Luis and the surrounding area since well before Colorado obtained statehood. Water has equaled life for the members of the community for generations. "Water is special," said Martinez.

The Sangre de Cristo Acequia Association was formed out of necessity and the need for protection. Traditionally, acequia members have addressed any grievances with the governing body known as the Comicion. The water owner would call their Comicion, meet and resolve the issue. However, this process has not proven viable in every situation and has had to adapt in some respects. In the San Luis area, irrigation has not been as high in recent years due to farmers and ranchers ceasing operations for a variety of reasons that include drought and the inability to make a living on these smaller acreages. This has caused concern due to the ten year policy.

WANT MORE INFORMATION ON THE ROUNDTABLE OR WANT TO KNOW HOW YOU CAN GET INVOLVED?

VISIT: RGBRT.org or email Info@RioGrandeHeadwaters.org

Let us know what you want to see in the Rio Grande Basin Roundtable Newsletter!

If any water were to be curtailed in the region, the loss of water would be considered injurious to many of the original rights in the State of Colorado. A solution was needed for the protection of these rights in order to obtain maximum benefit for all parties involved. A larger platform of discussion was also needed.

The solution that was found is now the Sangre de Cristo Acequia Association. In the ten years since its inception, the Sangre de Cristo Acequia Association has provided an avenue through which information can be shared, and problems can be addressed. This association serves 73 acequias which in turn serve 300 families. The SdCAA mission is to preserve acequias as the core social, political and economic institution of the Rio Culebra, Costilla, San Antonio, Los Pinos and Conejos watersheds and to protect the water rights and unique governance structures that will ensure the viability of the acequia system, and the rich ecology, heritage, and food production it supports for generations to come. Through incorporation, beneficial use is now being demonstrated in these drainages. There is now a solid process through which bylaws can be put in writing. The components of this process are a Legal and Technical Assistance Program, the Acequia Dispute Resolution Program, and Watershed Restoration. An annual forum known as the Colorado Congreso de Acequias, helps to disseminate myths and replace them with factual content. Another benefit that has come from incorporation is funding. The SdCAA has been able to make needed improvements to ditches along the region's drainages as well as secure needed assistance with the bylaw process. Eugene Jacquez serves as the local representative who leads the bylaw program. The position is funded through grant monies obtained by Colorado Open Lands. Jacquez is a firm believer that this process helps to prevent what could be an otherwise "scary" situation for the San Luis community and the surrounding irrigators. Documentation of water use and water rights has also been helpful for avoiding internal conflicts between families. It is a peaceful method for resolution. Jacquez pointed out that he would like to see more involvement.

Even so, SdCAA has many partners including the Costilla Conservancy District, Colorado Open Lands, the Getches Wilkinson Center, the Sangre de Cristo National Heritage Area, The Natural Resources Conservation Service, the Trinchera Blanca Foundation, and New Mexico Acequia Association. These partnerships will help to further the goals of the SdCAA.

Centuries of tradition and a fresh approach are all being combined to reach one goal; preserving the future of acequias. It is the hope of Martinez and Jacquez that this new and improved methodology will incentivise the younger generation to continue the agricultural traditions of their ancestors that will be passed to them.

For now, a time-tested tradition continues to thrive and improve and forge ahead with new ideas. ■



San Luis Peoples Ditch - the oldest water right in Colorado. Photo: Emma Reesor.

Happy Holidays from the
Rio Grande Roundtable!