

## *Acequia Involvement in Regional Water Planning: An Institutional Ethnography*

**Vanessa Mazal**

Under the guidance and assistance of its community partner organization, the New Mexico Acequia Association, this work asks, In what ways are communities of traditional Indo-Hispano irrigators – or *acequia* communities – contributing to water resource decision-making in northern New Mexico through regional water planning processes? and, How has organization at the regional level impacted acequia self-governance at the local level? Integrating legal and environmental anthropology traditions, this study will take an ethnographic approach to understanding the formal and informal institutional processes, social networks and relations involved in New Mexico’s regional water planning, focusing on acequia involvement and influence, and on the impacts of this involvement on local communities. The NMAA has been involved in the development of research priorities, in choosing specific regions for study, and in initiating contact with state representatives and regional planning participants, and will maintain an advisory role throughout the project. They are particularly interested in understanding the effects of local self-governance of regional organization and participation in water planning. Related questions include, Does acequia regional organization and participation in regional water planning serve to undermine or support local priorities? How do diverse local acequia interests become articulated as unanimous priorities or values?

### Background

Acequia commissions are watershed-based, common pool resource institutions governing irrigation within gravity-driven, earthen-work “acequia” ditch systems. Acequia technology has roots in Iberian and middle eastern irrigation technologies. It was imported to the Southwest as early as 1600 by the earliest Indo-Hispano settlers, representing the crown of Spain. Nearly 1000 acequias, primarily in mountainous north-central New Mexico, are still in operation and being managed communally at the watershed level, and are now recognized as political subdivisions of the state under the law. Thus, the state’s water code, though based in the Anglo-American doctrine of prior appropriation, which allocates water to its earliest users, also integrates aspects of acequia customary law, which enables users within a ditch to make collective decisions about transferring water out of their acequia, and about sharing water amongst junior and senior rights holders in times of scarcity (“repartimiento de aguas”).

Despite the historic and cultural significance of acequias, their contemporary importance to New Mexico’s rural communities, the political recognition of acequia institutions, and legal protection of many irrigators as senior water rights holders, acequia communities still face considerable challenges to their access to water, and thus to their livelihoods and communities. In recent decades New Mexico’s growing municipalities, new industrial and recreational economies, difficulties in meeting obligations of interstate water compacts, and increasing environmental priorities, have put pressure on the state to adjudicate and better manage its scarce water resources. As a result, the state developed legislation to support regional water planning efforts, organized at the county or multi-county level. Regional planning boards are voluntary, multi-stakeholder, private-public collaborations that seek to speed or settle costly and lengthy water adjudication processes, and to determine regional water allocation and use. Because it supports mostly small or subsistence-based agriculture and pasture, acequia irrigation lacks the economic clout that other industrial, municipal, and recreational uses bring to regional planning, and lacks the regulatory protection of many environmental and conservation measures. However, acequias have pooled their collective power by organizing at the regional level to influence water decision-making.

This research will examine three regional planning processes: the San Miguel/Mora/Guadalupe Counties effort; the Taos County effort, and the Rio Arriba County planning effort. These three regions were chosen because of the different planning phases they are involved in, as well as for the concentration of acequias within these counties.