

ATALAYA INSTITUTE

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Middle Rio Grande Farmers & Water Rights

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The Atalaya Institute is a tax-exempt 501(c)3 non-profit organization

Objectives|||

Overall Objective

The objective of this project is to qualitatively explore and understand the attitudes, behaviors, values, imagery and context from which key land owners – farmers - in middle Rio Grande conservancy district (those who have sold and those who have not) approach the issue of selling their water rights.

The transfer of water rights in the Middle Rio Grande from agriculture to urban/industrial uses is taking place at an accelerated pace. This work is being conducted to help better understand the pressures that the increasing demand for water rights has on the farmers in Socorro/Sierra counties, and the consequences that these dynamics have on the local communities. This work may also serve as data for the development of a model that would incorporate socio-economic factors and motivations of farmers in the MRG into the larger context of the complex water issues of the Rio Grande watershed.

Qualitative research is an effective marketing tool for developing hypotheses and insights on marketing and consumer issues. This kind of learning, however, is intended to be directional and not definitive. Its purpose is to offer hypotheses and a context from which to enhance the quality of the decision making for the Atalaya team.

Methodology & Approach|||

The following qualitative research sessions were conducted;

Monday 12/3/07

IDI – 125 acres – sold water rights – Orville Moore

IDI – 100 acres – rents now - has not sold – Albert Bustamante

IDI – 200 acres – rents now – has not sold – Larry Whitefield

Tuesday 12/4/07

Triad – Community Members

- Gary Perry, Farms 50 acres and serves MRGCD Board
- Jay Santillanes – Head of Socorro County Commission
- Deborah Dean – City of Socorro Heritage and Visitor Center

IDI – Representative Don Tripp

Focus Group – Farmers who have not sold (?)

- Virginia Johnson – owns and farms 40 acres
- Ken Katz – farms 30 acres (all rented)
- Ken Armijo – owns and farms 10 acres
- Paul Griego – owns and farms 60-90 acres
- Tom Delahanty – leases 40 acres (organic chicken operation)
- Robert Vega – owns and farms 50 acres

IDI – Alan Brawley – Farms 7.5 acres now. Over time has sold over 600 acres of his family’s farmland. Currently works as a realtor and helps farmers sell their water rights.

Focus Group – Farmers who have not sold

- Travis and Dennis Harris – owns and farms 450 acres
- Glen Duggins – owns 80 and farms a total of 400 acres
- David Wade – farms about 550 acres farms owns half and rents half of what he farms
- Betty McElvain – Owns 500 acres and operates a horse farm
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Wednesday 12/5/07

Triad – Community Members

- Susan Smith Helps farmers research and identify their water rights
- Ravi Bhasker - Mayor of Socorro
- NyLeen Troxel- Program Manager Socorro Soil and Water Conservation.

Focus Group – Farmers who have sold

- Melvin Towner – owns and farms 40 acres
- Philip Vanbuskirk – owns and farms 34 acres

IDI – Ermelinda DeBrine-Owns and farms some of 200 acres – has not sold water rights –

Focus Group – Farmers who have not sold

- Larry Durkin – owns 60 acres and farms 80 acres
- John Harris – owns 85 acres and farms 160 acres
- Dan Kloss – Owns and farms 200 acres

Overall Observations – Selected Voices

"Nobody wants to work the kind of work this takes. You can't hire anybody. . . You can't get anybody to go out and pick chile, you can't get them to haul bales of hay. They are not going to do it. So, to answer your question, I really don't know what's going to happen here."

Farmer – Sold Water Rights

"My dad used to say that, people, if you just let people alone, they'd screw up everything. And I guess we've succeeded. I guess if I was water I'd say you succeeded. You screwed up everything."

Farmer – Sold Water Rights

"The environmentalist, born in the back of a limousine, they don't know what you are going through. 50 years ago everybody had a farm in their family. They had a grandfather or an uncle or somebody somewhere. And now when I go to the city and people say what do you do? And they look at you like you are the first one they ever met. They are completely out of touch. An a lot of people, I get a little offended, a lot of people watch TV and have got the idea that farming is bad. And I say "what are you talking about – all the birds that come and eat, and the coyotes eat the birds" . . . I think most farmers love their land. That's why they are doing it. How you could take somebody like that and decide that they are bad for the environment. I love the environment, but you have to be realistic. It needs to be managed."

Farmer – Has Not Sold Water Rights

"Some day we'll need this land to raise food. People should build on the mountain side. Stop the development of prime land. Its not just here, its everywhere."

Farmer – Sold Water Rights

"The only people that have any water that is moveable is the farmer."

Farmer – Has Not Sold Water Rights

"Right now there is something in the wind where the Indians are being given major water rights with the idea that they are going to begin to sell water rights. . . moving the water out of the state and so you are drying up when you do that kind of stuff. If you move that water, its not water that can be used. By the denial of being able to drill a well, an irrigation well on your property, you've dried the land. Surface, subsurface. Anyway, water is a major issue right now and we are on the losing end of it. And this is being done on a statewide basis. And the sad part of it is, because of human nature you see people bickering among themselves and they lose sight of the whole picture.

So for the government offices it is divide and conquer."

Farmer – Has Not Sold Water Rights

Overall Observations

The Socorro Ag Community

All of the qualitative sessions that were conducted occurred in and around the valley in Socorro County. Most of the operations were more oriented towards farming and not ranching, but the lines here, especially for the farmer, are not so clear. Farming comes first, but there are always cattle and horses somewhere in the mix. Still, the voice of the farmer is the focus in this study.

Many Issues Rendered With Consistency Amongst Farmers

Most of the perceptions, attitudes, values and feel of our sessions were strikingly consistent amongst farmers. Regardless of farm size, type of operation, crop, rent or own, etc., the playback was extremely similar across the various demographics.

Some slight variations occurred only with regard to one's tenure in the valley. That was perhaps the only real difference we encountered. Bottom line, we think we have a fairly tight and consistent set of findings.

Facts Rendered With Inconsistency Amongst Farmers

Across our many sessions it was clear that the facts on the ground and the knowledge base concerning water issues is very uneven. This represents both an opportunity and a threat. Much of what is playing out right now, in terms of the future of New Mexico's water assets is playing out against a backdrop of flawed, incomplete or simply bad information.

The need for clear, broad-based and consensual information and a factual basis around water issues is significant. Yet, as we learned, communicating with this group is tricky for sure. There is little trust of information or opinions coming from outside sources and consequently their perspectives and opinions have become somewhat insulated.

Overall Observations

Community Member's Perspectives (non Ag)

Our sense is that community members provide little better than lip-service to the Ag community in Socorro. And, to extend the metaphor, they also speak out of both sides of their mouths.

While there is a superficial and almost knee-jerk link between the traditions and cultural identity of the community with agriculture, in reality most seem quite willing and ready to surrender to the inevitability of modern times and the new economy. What this implies is an end to agriculture as we know it. In the same breath they extol the traditional values of Socorro and then almost impatiently accept its rapidly approaching demise.

Based upon our few interviews with citizens of Socorro, we got the impression that Socorro is a distinctly different community than the ag community. There is some overlap, but the ag community is located below the Socorro community both geographically and socially. Some of this is evidentially due to the college that sits high above the valley, but this can't account for the whole divide.

Overall Observations

Tremendous Pressure on Farming

It seems like a perfect storm of problems has descended on the farming community just as the whole issue of selling water rights has come to everyone's attention. Even if we are to set aside the issues around water for a moment, the current problems and pressures on farming alone are enough to seriously threaten the survival of the ag community in the valley. Framers cite a range of issues including;

- The absence of affordable labor. (Several farmers plowed under their chile crops in frustration over the lack of labor.) The increased pressure by Homeland Security to curb the flow of undocumented workers coming across the border has exacerbated this problem for the farmers.
- Rising costs for all inputs (equipment, diesel, fertilizer etc.) wildly outpacing gains on their outputs.
- Increasing government regulations and enforcement on use of chemicals, farming practices, labor, etc.
- Reluctance of family and next generation to continue on as farmers.
- Increasingly negative attitudes and increasing ignorance about what farming is and how it contributes to the collective good. Farmers that were once seen as the epitome of American values seem to have fallen in stature to that of second class citizens.
- Just as globalization has opened the door to extremely cheap food options from countries like Mexico, (Even some Hatch chiles, the crop most identified with NM, are being grown in Mexico now for pennies on the dollar!), the door on cheap labor has been slammed shut. For many the pressures on farming are as bad or worse than they have ever been. And again, all of this is without even bringing water into the picture . . .
- Drought/Climate change. Even without the added pressures of development and growth in the cities upstream, there may be even less water available in a system that is already stretched to the limit.

Understanding the Water Situation

Scratching the Earth

This is the phrase framers like to use to express the incredible difficulty of what they are trying to do. Farming, it seems, has always been incredibly demanding in terms of its physical requirements and the sun-up to sun-down time commitment involved. Yet, even vigilance and hard work can't always assure success as the potential for calamity is always right around the corner. To some degree farming is a crap shoot, even to the most diligent, experienced farmers.

It is also true that for most of the farmers we met with, farming is more than a vocation, it is a way of life that informs every aspect of their existence. In other words, farming has traditionally been a lifestyle and an ongoing process. The concern about getting a 'return on their investment' seems to be relatively new priority that may have developed in conjunction with the increasing value of water.

Water is Hot, New and Different

Water has always been in the spotlight, but now it seems even more charged and polarizing. Everyone is talking about water now, and in many new and different ways. All of it is taking some getting used to.

"Albuquerque is attacking the water downstream."
Farmer - Has Not Sold Water Rights

Selling Water Rights; A New and Complex Option . . .

While it is true that framers have always faced serious difficulties, selling water rights hasn't been much of an option until recently when the value of water has skyrocketed to the point that now in many cases their water is more valuable than their land. In the past, they simply had to tighten their belts and scratch the earth even harder than before. If worse came to worse they would sell off part of their land. Suffering is nothing new to this community. Most of the old-timers we talked to had faced bankruptcy at several points in their lives. Hard times are part of the territory, and they seem to accept it, not only as inevitable, but as a necessary part of their identity as farmers. But as water has outpaced the value of land, selling water rights has introduced a new possibility in the mix.

Now water has some new previously unknown talents. It can be separated from the land, transferred, and so on. This is all relatively new.

Understanding the Water Situation

Complexity and Confusion

It is clear that now the water situation as a whole is clouded by significant confusion and colored by lots of heated emotions. Given the new powers and possibilities of water, mostly embedded in the somewhat new option to transfer it around and allow it to jump physical boundaries, a whole new bundle of questions, information and misinformation has been spawned. Farmers themselves are quite confused and often victims of misinformation.

Education and clarification is desperately needed. This new wave of complexity and confusion, unfortunately, is amplified by a real lack of trust amongst the key players at all levels. Given this inherent lack of trust of outsiders and new ideas, it isn't surprising that the successful brokers of water rights are more often than not farmers themselves.

Water Belongs to the Land

Where would water want to go, if it could choose?

"I'm sure, from my vantage point, it wouldn't want to go to the city! That's not where it belongs. . . Well I think it belongs to the people. It belongs to the land. . ."
Farmer – Sold Water Rights

"If water or the river were talking, it would say, this is home, I want to be part of the land. But I haven't heard water talk, so I don't know how it would talk. . ."
Farmer – Sold Water Rights

Almost all of the farmers we spoke to were emphatic about their deep feeling that water is married to the land--especially in the valley. It is a marriage that is integral to farming; consummated in the spring with planting and irrigating, and manifest most fully in the harvest. When this marriage is severed, each partner walks away dramatically diminished. Most of the folks we spoke to immediately envisioned a bleak and barren piece of land – turning to a desert – when the water went away.

This notion seemed to have deep emotional resonance and reflected the truth of accepted fact.

Understanding the Water Situation

Separating Water and Land

Most farmers we met with felt that separating these two was wrong in a kind of moral or spiritual way. It just should not be done. Those who could afford not to do it were more emphatic about this.

As we will see, at one level almost everyone agrees that it is a crime against nature to split water and land, but they also appear to silence this part of themselves at a later stage of the dialogue. Still this is a powerful emotional piece of the whole. And, it is something that is broadly shared, and they know it. For those who do sell, there are some feelings of shame and it is part of the reason they want to keep it quiet.

The separation of water from the land seems like a crime against the land--an unnatural act. But it is interesting that it is a crime against the land and not a crime against water, almost as if the land holds our ethical responsibility but water does not. In this context an argument for the conservation of land makes sense. But if there is an ethical responsibility that these farmers have towards water it is simply to **use** it--not waste it. This "ethic" may be reinforced by the OSE's "use it or lose it" policy. Within this construct it is hard to imagine what water conservation is or could be to farmers. Other than some talk about recharging the aquifer, there was little mention of water conservation at all.

Water *Belongs* to the Land

It is our sense that the earth comes first to the farmers. In their minds, the earth has a claim to the water but not the other way around. Implicit in this is the notion that water does not really have rights, but land, perhaps does. We think this core notion, unconsciously, helps grease the track for water transfers, as selling water may not feel as much like an ethical violation as selling land.

Understanding the Water Situation

Water Has No Place . . .

For farmers water is a transient thing. It does not seem to really belong to any specific place and does not seem to have any fixed allegiances. It goes with the flow. Its extreme mutability and flexibility may play a role in the way farmers relate to water. Unlike land, (like the farmers themselves) which is unmovable and highly inflexible, water is a free spirit and seems able to renew itself.

Water is so very abstract, ephemeral and unattached that we think farmers probably have far less of a sense of relatedness to it – at least relative to their land.

Water is to be Used – A Mere Commodity

For farmers water only has value when it is put to work. Without water, land is unproductive, ugly and uninhabitable. It is reduced to empty, lifeless desert.

Many get angry just seeing the Rio Grande flow by. They think such water is lazy and useless. Going south, or worse yet, headed to Texas!

Many comments about maintaining a flow, ostensibly to keep the silvery minnow afloat, represents a huge waste of water. Not to mention a misconception (from their perspective) about what really goes on with the river during the summer – when it naturally is supposed to run dry!

Still, water has very little aesthetic, or implicit value in this thirsty land. It is not a thing of beauty for most in this valley. It needs to be put to work.

Understanding the Water Situation

Water Far Bigger than the Rio Grande

Farmers had a much bigger picture of water than merely the Rio. They spoke a great deal of groundwater, and water flowing down from the mountains from rain or snowmelt. The river was just a part of this liquid mosaic. The Rio may represent the most visible and talked about side of the water issue, but it is just part of the mix for farmers.

Water and its comings and goings is a part of a more complex paradigm for farmers. Some seemed to be frustrated by the public's lack of awareness of the bigger picture with regard to water and its many sources.

Different Kinds of Water

Another very confusing dimension of the water situation is the variety of kinds of water and the multiplicity of situations that trigger the use or importance of each and all of them. And, not everyone is really clear on the definitions, status or viability of any of these kinds of water. Collectively they identify many kinds of water;

- Rain, snow, runoff. . .for starters!
- Pueblo water. This is seen as the highest grade of water. It is perceived as having trump-card powers over all other kinds of water.
- Texas Compact Water. Probably the most hated kind of water around! No one can make sense of this, and most feel the State Engineer is more interested in protecting this flow than anything or anyone else. (Given the fear of Texas lawyers, maybe for good reason!)
- Pre 1907 water – 'ancient water or senior water rights'.
- Junior water—water claimed or put to use after 1907
- Groundwater
- Paper water
- MRGCD water or leased water.
- Water Bank water. No one seems entirely sure what this is, or how it works. ('How do you bank water anyway?')

"When they started drilling all those wells they sucked the water table down and all these mountains quit running. You're pumping it out down here so it quits coming out up there."

Farmer – Sold Water Rights

Understanding the Water Situation

Eminent Domain

There is probably another kind of water – that which is taken away from farmers willy-nilly for purposes of the Silvery Minnow or other such follies. (Golf courses in some gated community up north or environmentalist's martinis perhaps.)

Most farmers are absolutely certain that their water and livelihoods can and most likely will be snatched away some day by some distant power no matter how senior their rights are proven to be. The needs of many will always trump the rights of a few. In most cases the water rights being sold are used to support the development that may ultimately represent the threat of eminent domain from the municipalities they are so concerned about. Yet this conflict of interest regarding water transfers to development was rarely mentioned.

"The time will come when you won't have water to sell. They are going to take it from you. They are not going to have people choke to death. You know that."
Farmer – Sold Water Rights

"There will come a time when they just come in and take it away anyway."
Farmer – Sold Water Rights

"Everyone wants to live in the valley and have 5 acres, or 2 acres to put a horse on. And we see an influx of people from outside the state. Land prices are cheap here compared to California. Another factor is that guys are having trouble making it farming and will sell off their water rights."
Farmer – Has Not Sold Water Rights

"When you think of how the government is operating I can understand why people are selling their water, because it will amount to a taking before it is over with. . . I can't fault them for selling their water."
Farmer – Has Not Sold Water Rights

Understanding the Water Situation

Selling: Upriver & Downstream Realities

Most farmers did not seem terribly concerned about the consequences of having water sold upstream. Here the laws of gravity seem to influence their thinking, as selling water to downstream users would be unthinkable, especially if those users are Texans. Most seemed to assume that regardless of how it is used, water sold upstream would flow back to them sooner or later.

But, there were also a fair number of farmers who were concerned about how the water table in Socorro might be impacted by selling water rights upstream. Several spoke about how irrigation water is necessary to recharge the aquifer. Yet it is unclear to us whether this is a legitimate concern for the health of the aquifer, a way to conserve water, or a justification for their irrigation methods. Nevertheless, farmers don't like to see water wasted and they are far more concerned that it be used than about its particular uses. Water flowing down the Rio Grande in Socorro County was identified as a waste more often than water being transferred to new developments up north.

Water Degradation

Several commented that the quality and purity of their water has been steadily declining and blamed it on the phenomenon of transferring water rights. Their water was starting to show the effects of having been used and reused before it reaches them. Many commented on how water has lost its vitality, carries more pollution and salts, and is less effective in growing crops. Several farmers talked about the increased amount of garbage flowing into their irrigation ditches. We were surprised to hear that even the drinking water in the valley is low quality and possibly getting worse. Surprisingly, this was a somewhat novel idea to many and they were intrigued to consider this consequence of being located downstream.

Understanding the Water Situation

Rules on Transfer Rights and Being Last in Line

Most seemed to view the management of water and transfers as being woefully inadequate. Many felt that more science is needed to better understand the losses incurred through evaporation, loss of recharge and other net impacts on the valley when transfers are made. Some also felt that a certain portion of water should remain on the land it came from.

There are also many problems for the downstream neighbor who has water rights when one or more neighbors sharing a ditch upstream sell theirs. The fear, and possibly the reality, is that they keep taking what is not really theirs or the flows in the ditch are reduced to the point that it becomes difficult to deliver adequate water to the downstream users. Either way it is a net loss for the downstream neighbor and creates resentment. This is further exacerbated by the uncertainty that leased water brings into the picture, as no one is really sure if the water being used by their neighbor is owned, leased or stolen.

Understanding the Water Situation

The State Engineer

The most scathing and serious criticism we heard was leveled at the State Engineer. This individual was seen as being entirely politically motivated, capricious, and unwilling to even operate within the framework of existing laws. Farmers had absolutely no confidence in this individual and little for the Office of the State Engineer itself. Most shook their heads in amazement at the whole thing!

The State Engineer was often referred to as the Water Czar and there were numerous examples of perceived wrong-doing, exorbitant fees, lengthy delays for ruling on water issues, and a perceived lack of concern for the ag community.

Most were incredulous that such an important function would be relegated to a single individual. Overseeing water policy and water rights is too important a function to be administered at the whim of any individual. They felt that a committee approach would be preferable.

What is your sense of the Valley?

"I think, my perspective, as far as . . . the Ag things, I can't really speak to the economics of the city . . . I think, personally I think things are dying – the farm end of things is dying pretty rapidly. From the standpoint of urbanization, farmers find it very difficult to make a living anymore because all your inputs are very high and what you get from selling your commodities don't stay on an equivalent with that . . .

Another factor, because of the kind of government that is being run . . .

I feel like the state engineer's office is a mini-Gestapo. They don't follow our own rules and regulations. They have the "powers that be" behind them from the governor on down and basically there is a taking of water going on basically through the depriving of individuals saying that they have 1907 water rights. They have set this thing up in such a way that there is a very narrow window of time or very narrow picture. And therefore people that have water rights are being deprived of their water rights and I personally believe that I would like to see water stay with the land. I don't like to see it move all over creation.

But if it is, preferably to stay in our state.

Farmer – Has Not Sold Water Rights

Understanding the Water Situation

Adjudication

Most farmers seem to live in a kind of unsettling limbo right now with regard to their water rights and the status of their water. While they may believe they have pre-1907 water rights, unless it is certified by the State Engineer, it is only a claim that anyone else can contest. In good years when the water is abundant, this is not really an issue. But when times get tough, it may be quite different.

Many farmers seemed uncertain about the seniority of their water rights and most farmers were adamant about the need for immediate adjudication for the valley to clear up all the misunderstandings. Yet it is unclear whether these demands for adjudication are motivated by a desire for clarity or by the hope of a windfall—senior water rights being worth up to \$30,000. per acre foot.

On an emotional level, it seems like yet another example of someone keeping them under their thumb – which they hugely resent. Several mentioned that trying to prove their water rights would require endless forms, at least \$30,000 and months and months of waiting. And after all of this, they would be dealing with someone who was above the law and could easily disregard their claim, even if it is legitimate.

Yet these sentiments were further skewed by the general attitude that even if adjudicated the senior water right holders might not be guaranteed water during a shortage because the municipalities and tribes upstream would receive precedence. In other words, because of the politics of the OSE and because of their downstream position relative to other users, even pre-1907 water rights may be dubious in terms of their guarantee.

Understanding the Water Situation

Fear and Loathing of Government

One gentleman we heard about absolutely refuses access to any and all governmental representatives on his land. For years and years he has refused to meet with Ag officials, or anyone wanting to speak to him about any program. His logic seems to be that even the smallest opening or linkage created between him and the authorities will give them a route or access to him and his land. Most of the farmers we met with seemed to share his sentiments, although not to such a degree. In any event it was clear that anyone in almost any kind of 'official' role was regarded with extreme suspicion. (This was strikingly evident when several farmers refused the incentive payments we were offering them until they were reassured that we weren't working for the government.)

The Impact of Selling Water – Invisible for Now!

Fortunately or unfortunately the real impact of selling water rights seems to be significantly delayed to the point of being invisible. Given this kind of built in 'time-delay' factor in all of this, the real impacts of water transfers will only be apparent long after the decisions have already been made.

Several farmers were under the false impression that it is typical to receive a 10 year water rights grace period after the sale of a water right. But a farmer can sell water rights and then lease water back from the MRGCD in order to keep farming. Consequently, in setting up this study it was difficult to determine which farmers had sold water rights and which hadn't. This picture is further confused when many of the farmer's are leasing the land they are farming. When there is a sufficient amount of water it appears to be business as usual, and regardless of who owns what the agricultural landscape looks normal enough. Yet how and where these changes would become apparent in a time of shortage is an important question that is very difficult to answer. Like a cancer that is spreading below the visible surface, it has hard to know exactly what is happening and has happened.

Some, who are aware of various sales that have happened, go so far as to believe that the impact of the whole thing may not be so bad after all – based on what they are seeing so far. It makes one wonder if the MRGCD leasing program is really a help to the farmers or if it is ultimately helping the developers by masking for the time being the reality of the situation in the valley.

Understanding the Water Situation

"Fires - when I was a kid you never had fires cause they didn't make them stay off, they let them eat up all this underbrush. Now the do-gooders have caused it to burn worse. Now its burning, burning, burning like it never used to."

Farmer - Sold Water Rights

Environmental Attitudes Absent

It was interesting to note that we heard almost no talk of the Rio Grande during these groups. Almost no one independently mentioned the river as a natural entity in its own rite. And certainly no one talked about it as a destination, a place of beauty, life, or such. It was almost like it did not exist.

Environmentalism and enviros are absolutely detested here. The silvery minnow (in league with the spotted owl and the Klamath River salmon) and all those who supported them are reviled. The wolf reintroduction was brought up on several occasions as an example of the continuing threat from environmentalists. (This is in spite of the fact that they aren't directly impacted by this program and there are no plans on reintroducing the lobo in Socorro County).

Even Bosque del Apache Wildlife Refuge got very scant mention. When it did it was vaguely remembered, but rarely cited as a valued and unique part of New Mexico's natural heritage or an asset to the valley. In fact, there was one instance that is held tightly in the farmer's collective memory, of a farmer who had to watch his crops and investment wither on the vine because during a drought the water was needed for the refuge. Needless to say, this is confirmation of their eminent domain fears of both the government, because it is managed by the Fish & Wildlife Service, and environmentalists, because it is a wildlife preserve.

Observation: It is hard to say how recent bouts with the silvery minnow may have influenced this community's view of the importance of the Rio Grande and the wildlife it serves. It is clear however that winning this war has cost the environmentalists dearly. If the farmers were given a hypothetical choice between selling water rights to upstream development or to the Rio Grande the farmers would ask for a qualification. The river, it seems, could possibly get the water but the farmers would prefer the water go to development before it go to saving the silvery minnow.

Understanding the Water Situation

Good Stewards of the Land?

The idea of nature benefiting from the presence of a farming community is one that most farmers are happy to speak to, but the idea of nature and the river having an independent right to exist or higher natural purpose to defend was totally out of the question.

At best farmers like to tout that they are good stewards of the land, and relative to other land options this may be true. But as a whole it is clear that their purview is extremely narrow at this time and the farm and humans come well before any other natural concerns. If nature can benefit from their efforts, that is all well and good, but few really seem to want to go out of their way for nature.

Strategic Observation: Farmers seem to have a different relationship with nature than non-farmers. They view it through a very specific lens and many have a sense of almost righteous entitlement about it – especially relative to non-farmers. This is understandable when considering how much time these people spend outside working on the land. Farmers have a very pragmatic and experientially based understanding of nature—what works and what doesn't work. The purview of nature seen through the broader lenses of sciences like ecology and biology are too abstract and lack relevance if the ideas aren't easily applicable to farming. The impact of environmentalism and environmental causes seems to have taken everything to a very tense and highly reactive place. The impact of this is that to dialogue around nature, the environment or even the river as an ecological entity is extremely difficult. Great care and creativity needs to go into framing the whole issue of nature and the river right now.

Understanding the Water Situation

The Green Valley

The phrase 'keeping the valley green' was about as close as anyone got to seeing the Valley as a whole and espousing an ethos for it. The use of green here meant primarily 'in ag production' however.

People do relate to this notion to some degree. It is motivating and meaningful to them. The link to water and even the Rio Grande is in there, although not very potent right now.

"The river is where life first flowed. The history of it. The Indians when they lived here. . . I used to think it was the prettiest place in New Mexico – you know the Bosque, and the farms on the east side of Socorro. It hasn't really changed that much. Its not like Los Lunas, the bedroom community of Albuquerque."

Farmer – Has Not Sold Water Rights

Use It Here – Keep It Here

It was not everyone, but there were a few voices advocating for trying to keep the water in the county if at all possible. This seemed at least a preferable alternative to seeing it go elsewhere. The basis of this sentiment seemed mostly emotional though.

Someone suggested that by keeping it here it would force water users like industry to come to the water, rather than the other way around. This is an important observation because in the transfer of water to the north Socorro may be losing more than agriculture, it may be giving away the potential for other forms of economic development.

Farmers Do Want Credit For Their Positives

Several commented that the practice of flood irrigating mimicked the natural action of the floodplain. (This was offered up as a defense against what is increasingly seen as an outmoded and wasteful agricultural practice.)

Still, others did mention that they are helping to charge the aquifers. The water they use seeps down into the land and makes its way into the aquifers that feed the river and keep the valley green. Yet this is never figured into any equation that they are aware of and they are left on the defensive, justifying their farming practices and way of life.

"I don't see how anybody could feel that you are wasting water raising food, whether it be alfalfa or corn. Its all coming to humans. How in the world is that a waste? It should be priority number one."

Farmer – Has Not Sold Water Rights

Understanding the Water Situation

Conservation Easements and other alternatives

Given the deep mistrust of any outside group or agency, especially the government, any incentives or alternatives to the sale of water rights or land is met with a skepticism bordering on an outright refusal to even entertain the options. The whole arena of conservation easements was readily dismissed out of hand on the basis of horror stories and bad information. Making any kind of inroads here will be difficult as the current climate of suspicion and uncertainty make the task of education that much harder. With this cantankerous group one wonders how the water brokers got their foot in the door to the point where water transfers have become somewhat legitimized.

Love of the valley and the whole notion of having the land stay green and not turn into desert seems like the most motivating angle. The idea of preserving it for the good of wildlife or even the river, based on what we heard, is a harder argument to make. It is even hard to create incentive around helping preserve their way of life because in the first place, they don't want any help, and in the second place, they aren't convinced that farming has a future.

There isn't a lot of nuance or possibility with this pragmatic salt-of-the-earth community. Chocolate and vanilla are still the only two flavors served here. Similarly, selling land or water rights are right now the only alternatives being considered in terms of paying off the debts.

MRC

“The time will come where they will just come in and have to take it. Give it to the people. . . The Conservancy will take it away from all of us. . . The time is coming. That war will be a big, big issue.”

Farmer – Sold Water Rights

The MRGCD holds an interesting position in the valley. It isn't thought of strictly as a governmental agency and consequently escapes some suspicion but it is still enough of a bureaucracy to generate a good deal of concern. The MRGCD is perceived as a powerful entity more because they are the ones on the ground operating the ditches and controlling the water than because they have a say in water rights and policy. We got the sense that most of the interaction with the MRGCD is with the ditch riders and many of these are community members and had been farmers or ranchers themselves. The MRGCD seems approachable because it employs real people and maintains a community face. The OSE, on the other hand is aloof, detached and distant from the farmers and their needs, and consequently can't be trusted at all.

The Cultural Context – Selected Voices

“Course I’m 75 years old so I don’t have to look very far out. And the kids don’t want it. None of the kids want these farms or ranches. I have five of them in here and they don’t want to have anything to do with it, so I’m probably going to sell it.”

Farmer – Sold Water Rights

“You know a rancher or a farmer, he really doesn’t have anything until he accumulates land and then he sells it. Kids don’t want to live that way. They want to have money as they go along.”

Farmer – Sold Water Rights

“When your kids are growing up you work them to death. Because you need them. You’ve got to have them. By the time their grown they say the heck with this. You work so hard and you’ve got no money.”

Farmer – Sold Water Rights

“You got to set there and try to accumulate a piece of land, and then when you sell it – it’s like your bank in agriculture. It’s like your bank, but you can’t have any money till you sell it and quit.”

Farmer – Sold Water Rights

“It’s a way of life, to me at least, that is about as good as you can get. But everything in this world today is based on money. Money effects everything.”

Farmer – Sold Water Rights

The Cultural Context

Fierce Individualism

The Socorro Valley Ag community is a fiercely independent bunch. While they may have extremely strong ideas of what is right and wrong it is equally true that they go to great lengths not to impose their ideas on their neighbor.

Part of the reason these people came to New Mexico, and manage to hang on and survive here, is their fierce independence. This seems to be the unwritten but sacred ethos of living in this state.

The personal property right is the sacred law above all others that seems to justify and support this individualism. On some level this right almost feels akin to the right to exist. The farmers we met with would fiercely defend this right in whomever, or whatever situation it is found, even if defending this right could undermine their broader community. This is certainly the case with developers whose right to buy and own water is sacrosanct, even when it is perceived to be detrimental to the valley as a whole.

Observation: It is our sense that this unyielding unwillingness to impose one's beliefs on another may play a role in keeping this group from organizing or arriving at a consensus or larger view on things like water rights transfers, etc. and their impacts on the community.

On one level the ag community gives meaning to the enormous difficulties the farmers continually endure. Most farmers would bend over backwards to help their neighbors and for most, it is this communal reciprocity that seems to make the whole endeavor worthwhile. But as important as community values are, they will usually take a backseat to the independence that private property laws protect. There seems to be very little ability to collectively gather together to any end other than supporting each others independent struggles. Farmers are a community of individuals.

The Cultural Context

"I don't see how anybody could feel that you are wasting water raising food, whether it be alfalfa or corn. Its all coming to humans. How in the world is that a waste? It should be priority number one."

Farmer – Has Not Sold Water Rights

"I think [farmers] are just about forgotten. Don't you? I think so. You know, when I was a kid you see the presidential elections with Jimmy Carter through the years and this and that, farming was on the agenda. Its not on anyone's agenda now."

Farmer – Has Not Sold Water Rights

"I think its kind of dangerous – some of my friends hear I'm going to stop growing chiles, and they say, what are you going to do? And I turn it back on them and say, no, no, no, what are you going to do? I'll be fine. What are you the consumer going to do? Where are you going to buy your stuff? . . .Its dangerous for this country to be in that shape."

Farmer – Has Not Sold Water Rights

"You know, when that old man farmer died, all that knowledge is gone. When the old man goes, that's the end of most farms. No kids want to do it."

Farmer – Has Not Sold Water Rights

Unappreciated and Invisible

While everyone is quick to speak to the positive farming community and small town values of Socorro most farmers feel as though no one is really on their side. From the farmer's perspective the average consumer has no appreciation for the hard work of the farmer and even blames them for wasting resources - especially water. Politicians and most of the citizenry also seem totally on the side of development, (even if that is sometimes unconscious). The new economy is what farmers feel everyone around them really values.

It was hard for us to not agree with members of the Ag community with regard to this. There appeared to be precious little going on within Socorro to help build and support their rapidly transitioning Ag Community – at any level. And yet we wonder how willing this community would be to accept help if it were available.

"15 years ago you couldn't see another house near here. Now everyone is subdividing. Pretty soon you're going to be setting right in the middle. And then you're going to pretty much have to give up because you can't operate. They are always complaining about the smell . . . Those kinds of things will finally choke the farmer and rancher out."

Farmer – Sold Water Rights

The Cultural Context

Make Way for Development

We expected the 'D' word to have more of a negative charge, but oddly enough it did not. Most seemed to simply give in to the sheer inevitability of development transforming Socorro Valley and most of New Mexico. There seemed to be a sense of fatalism around the future of farming in New Mexico and an unwillingness to get too involved in trying to find or manage alternatives. This seemed like an oddly familiar place for them, as if this isn't the first time they have encountered this. It is our best estimation that because of experience with drought, hail, floods, pests, freezes, etc. farmers have learned how to fail over and over again. But especially for the farmer, hope springs eternal. There was always a sense of joy woven into their stories about hardships of the past, and their fatalistic accounts of the future.

These people have been educated by the land, by weather and the cycles of the seasons. Here failures and successes are ephemeral. Their purview is mostly contained in an annual perspective and they almost seem more accustomed to short term consequences.

The End of an Era?

While this is a hard kind of thing to find direct evidence for, there was a palpable sense that we were stepping into a world that is on the verge of extinction. Even the participants felt it – and it lent the sessions a kind of pathos and intensity that was frequently quite moving. Tears were shed more than once.

The youngest participants we could find were around 50 years old and median age of the farmers who participated was probably closer to 60 to 65. There were very few farmers who had children interested in taking over the farm, and those who did would often try to steer them away from farming to more profitable vocations. We also didn't get a sense that there was a different demographic ready to come in and fill the void.

The Cultural Context

The End of an Era? *Cont'd.*

Even if a new breed of farmers was to come onto the scene they (for better or for worse) would essentially be starting over. Even with NMSU just down the road, farming here isn't really an academic enterprise, rather it has been a vocation based on an accumulative experiential wisdom that is passed from generation to generation. Albert Bustamonte learned Chile farming from his father, who had learned it from his father. Albert talked about a neighbor who had decided to live his dream and become a farmer and chuckled at his clumsy attempts to farm "out of a book". It is a whole lineage that is being lost, not just the land and the water.

As we will see when we attempt to render the character and identity of this Socorro Farmer more fully, there is a kind of stoic acceptance of this time of harsh transitions. Many seemed almost resigned to what was going on. Though practical on many levels, these people are very intuitive and seem to know when to fight and when not to. Now, most seemed less inclined to fight.

Unfortunately, the whole issue of water rights is playing out against the backdrop of this significant cultural context. It is a critical factor to consider. Many of the reasons to sell or not tend to relate more to cultural factors than merely rational marketplace facts.

Farmers are traditionalists. Their understanding of agricultural, economics, values etc. have most likely been passed down through many generations. This gives them a determination and resiliency on the one hand, but on the other they can be stubborn and resistant to new ideas and alternatives. There is no question that we are losing a great deal of ag knowledge accumulated over many generations in a sort of oral history, and this is unquestionably a huge loss. There may, however, be more opportunities of developing new farming practices that are more congruent to the 21st century. But even if these new farmers exist, it is unlikely that they have the means to step into this world because the high value of the land and water on the one hand, and the narrow profit margin on food, hay and alfalfa, on the other, make it economically untenable. This end of an era represents an opportunity for change that will be taken, and presently it seems that the developers are the one's who can afford to take it.

The Cultural Context

Farmers and Farming Culture

Clearly farming is far more than an occupation. Once a farmer, always a farmer was the mantra for almost all. There is something about it that gets into your blood and will not leave, according to most we met with. Despite all of their hardship and difficulties most were adamant that given the chance to do it all again they most certainly would.

Knowing what you do now would you do it again?

"Damn right. You know I grew up that way, it's a way of life to me. . . Dollars is not a big thing to me. . . Yes I would do it again in a minute.

I wouldn't even hesitate. Its all I know."

Farmer – Sold Water Rights

Traditional 'Acequia' Farming Culture and Tradition

It is equally true that there is an entire culture that comes with being a farmer in Socorro County (and almost all of the Rio Grande we would speculate). Regardless, the fact of the matter is that this is something of a package deal in New Mexico; farmers and a very unique farming culture.

It is important to point out that almost everyone, with only one or two exceptions, belonged to what we are calling traditional New Mexican farming culture. The traditional farming community has bragging rights to the oldest, most New Mexican and most authentic part of the soul of New Mexico.

It was our sense that most of the cultural values and practices that inform what we are calling traditional NM farming culture were informed by acequia traditions. Even those who are not Hispanic and descended from this tradition appear to subscribe to this as well. In the Rio Grande Valley surface water and ditches are relied upon for farming and the center pivot sprinklers that dominate farm land across the country are simply not a part of the landscape.

There were relatively few 'new operations' or people who approached the land from anything other than the traditional NM farming culture perspective. Perhaps the sheer economics of land these days precludes such newcomers from being able to farm. Regardless, as we will see, this is a problem. A way of life is dying, and with it an entire sector of the economy is going too.

The Cultural Context

Culture Clash

In a sense what is really going on in the Socorro Valley and, clearly elsewhere, on the Rio Grande, is that one culture is being upended and rapidly displaced by another. The values, logic systems, social forums, technologies and tools in each culture are distinctive and unique.

We think spending some time going into some detail around this is a worthwhile initiative because along the way it will help frame up the issues in a compelling way and will also be of assistance to those who are working to find ways to preserve or work with this endangered culture or these endangered lands and water.

We have identified a number of what we call culture clash tensions that help showcase those things that are playing havoc with the Ag community more broadly and water issues more specifically now. But there are two important dimensions and implications to this discussion of this culture clash;

- the culture divide undermines a way of life
- the culture divide greatly disadvantages/dis-empowers farmers with regards to the whole issue of water rights and their options

Cultural Bias In Favor of Development

Unfortunately it is almost always the case that the dominating culture (modernity) controls the terms and nature of the discourse, which loads the deck powerfully in its favor. And that, of course, is what is happening now. Almost everything is set up, encoded, and organized in the frame of reference of the dominant culture. The farmers are screwed from the get-go! When dealing with water rights they are forced to enter a world they are ill-equipped to deal with.

No New Ag?

As true as the above observation is, it is equally true that except for Tom the chicken farmer, there seemed to be almost no mention or observation of new and different kinds of farmers coming to the area. Despite the frequent critique of these old farming practices, no one seems to have ideas or the impetus to do it differently either. It is hard to see how ag will not slowly fade away entirely in this area over time.

The Cultural Context

Key Culture Clash Tensions

There are several key dimensions that emerge as powerful themes that continually show up and represent powerful 'hot spots' or 'tripping points' for the encounters between these two worlds. They are;

Traditional (look back)

Land/Earth Based

Social Technologies

Abundance Orientation

Food as Security

Extended Family/Legacy

Life as a Calling

Private, Selective and Secretive

Indirect

Localized and Real

Modern (look forward)

Mind/Idea Based

Mechanized Tech

Scarcity Orientation

Money as Security

Individual

Life as Choices

Broadcast/Public

Direct

Global and Abstract

This section attempts to briefly sketch out only a few of the dimensions of the cultural clash that is playing out and how it impacts the whole issue of the future of the Ag community and in turn water rights in the Middle Rio Grande.

Traditional (look back)

Modern (look forward)

Most farmers tend to value tradition more than innovation. The old ways encapsulated a tried and true practical wisdom. While many pride themselves on many recent changes in farming practices, in fact change is very hard to deal with here. For some it is easier, or even preferable to give up or die than to change. The new world view is impatient and dismissive of this traditional stance.

Land/Earth Based

Mind/Idea Based

It is easy to see why traditional farmers are so ill equipped to step into the highly rational, political and legalistic mine field of water rights. It is antithetical to their cultural values.

The Cultural Context

Social Technologies

Some parts of the tradition of acequias and the sophisticated social organization that it entailed is hard wired into the current farming community. Concrete ditches represent one small example of more mechanized technology displacing old ways of connecting, cleaning the ditches, working through differences, and maintaining the land.

Mechanized Tech

Abundance Orientation

Farmers, despite their sometimes desperate lot, subscribe to a mindset of abundance; if you treat the land right and have a little luck, it will provide what you need. There is enough to go around. Modern thinking is more based on scarcity – this is how we create value in a capitalist world. Shifting perspectives from the glass is half full to half empty puts new pressure on water and dials up the anxiety. Also, it used to be that just getting along was enough. Now, there are new standards to meet. Getting by is not enough in our world of increasing scarcity.

Scarcity Orientation

Land/Food as Security

There was a time when the farmer could count on his land and its abundance to be the inheritance of the child. Most came into farming as recipients of this value system. But today modern culture defines money as security. Farmers are caught in the cross hairs – and increasingly yield to their children's value systems which are increasingly shaped by modernity.

Money as Security

Extended Family/Legacy

With the fragmentation of modern living, tastes and choices the individual and the group seem to come into greater conflict. Most farmers sadly acknowledged that their children simply did not want to be farmers. The collective strength and will of the extended family, which is needed to succeed in this kind of farming is all but gone.

Individual

Private, Selective and Secretive

As we have discussed, this is a culture that does not seem inclined to organize, harmonize or activate easily. Information is somewhat foreign and its power is elusive to the traditional farmer. As a group they are easily overpowered by the modern world and its ability to shape and broadcast information.

Broadcast/Public

Closing Comments

Extreme Fatalism

Almost every session we ran was pervaded by a sense of fatalism. And given everything that we have commented on up till now, it is not hard to understand why.

"Lots of time people are forced to sell their water, but you know you'd like to keep the water on the land. I'd like to . . . But on the other side of the coin, when I started talking I said, I think we are going to lose this water."

Farmer – Sold Water Rights

To Sell or Not to Sell

In the current climate it is hard to see why people do not sell. There is such confusion, misinformation, absence of positive advocacy for farmers, etc. that taking the bird in the hand is hard to argue against.

Cashing Out the Inheritance . . .

From what we heard almost 90% of those who sell water rights do so under significant economic duress. While these are tough times for agriculture right now, we think it is the compounding influence of a dying culture that ultimately tips the scales. And it is the unfamiliarity with the new culture that disempowers and obscures the real dimensions of selling water rights.

Adversity could be met and dealt with as long as the extended family was aligned and willing to continue to scratch the land. But that is no longer the case.

Whereas before each child could count on either inheriting the farm or being given a plot of land, children today simply do not want any of it. Their parents are forced to translate their inheritance from a farm, and a way of life, to a cash payout.

Closing Comments

Those Who Have Not Sold . . .

It would be nice to say we had tapped into some potent insight around why some people hang on and some do not. Sadly, it is our sense that the only reason many have not yet sold is that they are not yet facing the kind of dire scenarios that sellers have. Unfortunately, it only seems like it is a matter of time.

Farmers are Hard to Help!

It is clearly our sense that this group is not an easy one to help. But this observation goes hand in hand with what frequently looks like a certain sense of futility and acceptance bordering on passivity.

Lack of a sense of the Consequences

It seems that both farmers and community members really lack any sense of the real consequences of what is happening right now with regard to water. This is true with climate change as well which was usually brought up only to be discounted. Farmers, it seems, look at short term consequences because they live in an annual cycle of planting and harvesting, long term consequences may be a bit foreign. Water banks and leased water also work to forestall the manifestation of these long term consequences.

Knowledge Gaps

Right now it is obvious that there are many potent knowledge gaps to deal with here. The net impact of the water issue at the community level is probably the biggest knowledge gap to consider. There is a real dearth of information at a purely hydrological level. Right now all of the action is happening behind a kind of time-delay smokescreen. When the dust settles, it will be too late.

Simple support and advocacy for a disadvantaged culture is another huge issue. New Mexico may be unconsciously making many choices right now about its future. These decisions are being made primarily in an economic context. Simply put, farming can not survive because it is no longer profitable and development will continue because it is profitable. Yet the cultural and environmental impacts of losing farms and farmers aren't accounted for when an assessment is based on economic terms alone.

Closing Comments

Pueblo Lawsuits

Pueblo lawsuits represent an intriguing new dimension in all of this as they may be a kind of legal trump card. One water broker said he had suspended all activity until some of these high profile cases were settled.

Conclusion

Finally it really seems like there are few real voices for water right now in New Mexico that have any real traction or support. Yet this massive shift that is now taking place around water is affecting New Mexico on so many different levels--cultural, economic, and environmental. Some of the important issues that are being impacted by the water transfers out of the Socorro valley include, but are not limited to, food security, immigration, wildlife and wildlife habitat, desertification, urban sprawl and economic development.

Because water is so critical to all these issues the farmers are unwittingly caught up in the middle of a changing landscape and their decisions will influence the trajectory many of these issues will take. Consequently, it is not only important to understand how these external pressures are effecting the farmers, but also to understand the values, the motivations and attitudes the farmers hold in relation to these pressures.

We have tried to present this study in an unbiased and nonjudgmental way. It was a pleasure and an honor to meet face to face with these remarkable people and to hear their opinions and their stories first hand. This study was not meant to decide if or how to support the farmers, the brokers, the developers, the wildlife, or the Rio Grande. Rather, it is our hope that this study offers some context with which to better understand the complexity surrounding all these issues and their relationship to the farmers in the Socorro Valley.