



## **‘Historic’ water pact signings in Taos**

**By Matthew van Buren and J.R. Logan**

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Representatives from all levels of government gathered at Taos Pueblo last week for the signing of documents related to the Abeyta Water Rights Settlement.

Leaders from Taos Pueblo and the town of Taos gathered July 10 at the Taos Pueblo Tribal Council’s offices to sign a “bilateral agreement” between the town and Pueblo — a meeting that was historic in itself, Taos Pueblo Lt. Gov. Gilbert Suazo said, as he could not remember another occasion when the Taos Town Council had come to the Tribal Council’s chambers.

The bilateral agreement, which is one part of the larger Abeyta Settlement, limits how much water the town and Pueblo can pump from certain existing wells so neither party jeopardizes the water supply of the other.

Suazo said he and Tribal Council member Nelson Cordova had been involved in the water settlement negotiations for years. He said the bilateral agreement may appear simple, but it took a lot of hard work to reach.

Cordova agreed, saying the negotiations had gotten tough at times, descending into name-calling and acrimony before an agreement was finally reached.

“It hasn’t always been cordial,” he said. “It’s been a long road.”

Cordova emphasized that the signing of the agreement is only the beginning, and that implementation will be the hard part.

He said he hopes the parties will work to implement the settlement in a “neighborly manner” without losing sight of the ever-important “human element.”

Taos Pueblo Gov. Laureano Romero said he felt fortunate to be serving as governor during the signing of such a “historical document.” War Chief Benito Sandoval said as neighbors, leaders from the town and Pueblo need to care for the land and work together to find solutions to their common problems.

Town Councilor Rudy Abeyta said the signing marked a “very significant day” and that trust and a good rapport had been built between town and Pueblo leaders.

“I’m proud to be part of this,” he said.

### San Juan-Chama Project

The following day, July 11, U.S. Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar and Acting Assistant Secretary of Indian Affairs Donald “Del” Laverdure, along with representatives from Taos Pueblo, the state of New Mexico, the town of Taos, El Prado Water and Sanitation District, Taos Valley Acequia Association and other entities, gathered at Taos Pueblo’s historic village to mark the water settlement.

During the visit, Salazar signed San Juan-Chama Project Water Contracts for three settlement parties — Taos Pueblo, the town of Taos and El Prado Water and Sanitation District — before touring the Taos Pueblo village and Buffalo Pasture.

According to the “repayment contract” involving the town, the United States agrees to make available 366 acre-feet per year from the San Juan-Chama Project, with the point of delivery being the outlet works at Heron Dam.

The contract also lays out the town’s proportionate share of investment costs — \$266,910 — incurred by the United States in constructing the reservoir storage complex and a repayment schedule of 40 installments of \$11,289, which includes interest of about 3 percent.

Since 1970 the San Juan-Chama Project — administered by the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation — has brought water from the San Juan River Basin, through tunnels under the Continental Divide, and into the Rio Grande River Basin. The additional water allocated in the recent contracts is meant to accommodate future water use by the Pueblo, the town and El Prado Water and Sanitation District.

Without San Juan-Chama water, the parties may have instead been forced to “offset” additional pumping by seeking out and buying private water rights.

San Juan-Chama water destined for Taos Pueblo is meant to satisfy the Pueblo’s claim without jeopardizing water rights holders in the Taos Valley.

### Tenacious

Pueblo leaders, including the governor and war chief, welcomed the dignitaries, and Suazo stressed Taos Pueblo’s role as a stronghold and protector of Native culture over the years. He said the Pueblo must be “ever-vigilant.”

“We are very tenacious in our desire to protect our homelands,” he said. Suazo said the San Juan-Chama Project water has been held in reserve, awaiting the finalization of the settlement agreement Salazar addressed a sizable crowd gathered for the event, saying it was a “huge honor and privilege” to attend.

An appointee of President Obama, Salazar said the federal government is working to restore tribal lands nationwide.

He said the signing of the first part of the agreement will begin to bring funding — which will eventually amount to \$150 million — for implementation, including infrastructure improvements. He said he was proud to be taking the “historic step” of signing the contracts.

Salazar said he is hopeful a final agreement will come back to Taos in September, after it has been approved in Washington, D.C. “This is very meaningful to Taos Pueblo,” he said.

During a brief interview after the signing, Salazar said he is confident the settlement agreement will be implemented, and he no longer sees obstacles ahead that would prevent it from becoming finalized. He said he is “absolutely confident” it will be funded in full. “I don’t see problems ahead,” he said.

According to a release from the town of Taos, Mayor Darren Córdova counts the signings among his “proudest accomplishments” as mayor, as they signify a “new, positive era of water management and preservation” and the solidifying of a “positive relationship” between the town of Taos and Taos Pueblo.

“Congratulations to all parties taking part in this historic settlement,” he is quoted as saying. “We now look forward to implementing these agreements and mutually benefiting from the \$150 million in federal funding for area water infrastructure improvements.”



**Above, Nelson Cordova and Gilbert Suazo of Taos Pueblo, escort U.S. Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar, center, to the tribe’s Buffalo Pasture, Wednesday (July 11). Cordova, left, and Suazo, right, have been instrumental in working for Taos Pueblo on a variety of land and water rights issues.**



**At left, Salazar takes a drink from the Rio Pueblo. Salazar exclaimed to Taos Pueblo Gov. Laureano Romero who stood nearby, “Look governor, I’m drinking from the lifeblood of your people.”**

**The Rio Pueblo originates at Blue Lake, a site considered sacred to the Taos tribe.**



Photos by Rick Romancito

**From left, Taos Pueblo Gov. Laureano B. Romero, U.S. Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar and Taos Mayor Darren Córdova sign the San Juan-Chama Project Water Contracts, July 11 at Taos Pueblo.**