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Taos Pueblo Water Rights Settlement is Signed Today

(SANTA FE, New Mexico) – History was made today at Taos Pueblo as Pueblo Governor James Lujan, New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson, and other local parties signed a water rights settlement agreement, marking an historic step toward ending more than three and a half decades of litigation in the *Abeyta* water rights adjudication.

The Taos Water Rights Settlement, once approved by Congress, will adjudicate Taos Pueblo's claims and expedite the adjudication of non-Pueblo claims on all water rights in the Rio Pueblo de Taos and Rio Hondo stream systems. Parties to the settlement include -- Taos Pueblo, the State of New Mexico, the Town of Taos, El Prado Water and Sanitation District, Taos Valley Acequia Association and its fifty-five member acequias, and twelve Taos-area Mutual Domestic Water Consumers Association.

Officials including New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson, leaders from Taos Pueblo, State Engineer John D'Antonio, New Mexico Attorney General Patricia Madrid, the Mayor of Taos, and representatives from all the local parties were among those present at a ceremony hosted by the Pueblo. The signing was followed by a friendship dance and a reception.

"We are gathered here today to ratify a historic agreement," said New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson. "In a very real sense, the Taos Pueblo Water Rights Settlement is a celebration of New Mexico. A recognition that despite their differences in culture and background, the people must share a common limited resource – water."

"Today's local signing ceremony for the Taos Pueblo Draft Water Rights Settlement Agreement is a significant event in the long history of the Taos Valley," said Taos Pueblo Governor James Lujan Sr. "We have all come together as friends and neighbors to strengthen our bonds and to commit ourselves to work that remains ahead of us. Though our efforts in Washington, D.C., will be difficult, the unity and solidarity demonstrated today, at this historic event, will certainly help us as we seek to secure a final resolution of this case."

"This marks another defining moment in the history of water in New Mexico," said State Engineer John D'Antonio. "This settlement is the product of countless hours of negotiations between parties and is a testament to what can come from hard work, compromise, and collaboration. Agreements of this kind are imperative to meeting New Mexico's future water needs."

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"I am honored to be one of the Taos Pueblo signatories to the Taos Pueblo Draft Settlement Agreement," said Taos Pueblo War Chief Robert Espinosa. "As War Chief this year I have the traditional responsibility for the protection of the watershed that is a major source of water for this settlement and for our sacred Buffalo Pasture. I, and future War Chiefs, will continue to provide this protection for the critical watershed and to ensure that the quality of this water and Buffalo Pasture are protected."

"This is an extremely important occasion in Taos Valley," said Taos Mayor Bobby Duran. "We are proud of the local parties' accomplishments in negotiating a settlement that we consider to be a win, win for all of us in the Taos Valley".

"This is a real triumph of the little people – meaning that, the local people in the Taos Valley communities along with Taos Pueblo have negotiated a much better solution to the area's long standing water disputes than one that would likely be reached through years of costly litigation forced upon the local communities by the U.S. Government and Federal Court," said John Painter Board Member and primary negotiator for El Prado Water and Sanitation District. "The Settlement provides a real foundation and blueprint for how the limited water resources in the Taos Valley will be shared from now on and into the future."

The Taos Valley Acequia Association is an organization that is comprised of the leadership of 55 community ditch associations. The association represents, on common issues, over 7,000 Taos Valley irrigators. "The Taos Valley Acequia Association has been involved in the Abeyta water negotiations since their beginning in October, 1989," said Palemon Martinez, President of the association. "We are pleased that a settlement agreement was finally developed which we feel adequately protects the acequia's rights as well as the rights of other parties to the settlement. Long standing customs of surface water sharing will continue into the future."

The 12 Taos-area Mutual Domestic Water Consumers Associations are community water systems and political subdivisions of the state that provide domestic water to thousands of people in the rural non-Indian communities in the Taos Valley. "The twelve Mutual Domestic Water Associations in the Taos Valley are pleased with the settlement agreement," said Hamilton Brown, spokesperson for the 12 associations. "At long last it resolves our uncertainties over our water rights and provides us with the resources to supply domestic water to over 5,000 residents in our valley."

The agreement is a complex document that provides for: quantification of the Pueblo's aboriginal water rights while avoiding disruption to existing non-Pueblo uses; protection of sacred Pueblo wetlands; protection of Pueblo and non-Pueblo rights, including those water rights of the 55 Taos Valley acequias; agreement of the parties to refrain from priority calls for both surface and ground water uses; agreement as to sources of water; and mutual support for those projects necessary to provide for the sustainable development of needed water supplies within the Taos Valley.

The signing of this local agreement brings closure to the local phase of the negotiations effort and years of technical assessment, dispute, negotiation, and compromise. The Taos Pueblo Settlement Agreement represents the collective decision of a large group of Native American, state, and local constituents concerning the proper allocation and use of water resources in the Taos Valley. Given the long, contentious, and disruptive history of the parties' disputes over those resources, completion of this local agreement is of tremendous significance.

Although the signing of the settlement agreement at the local level is a monumental event and cause for celebration, the settlement process is not completed. Now that the settlement is signed here in New Mexico, the negotiating parties will seek federal approval, including passage of settlement legislation by Congress and signature into law by the President. Next it must receive the necessary federal and state funding before it can be implemented.

The settlement agreement and supporting documents are available for public review at the Office of the State Engineer's website at: www.ose.state.nm.us under "Hot Topics" and at www.taospueblo.com.

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