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Op-Ed: Mora Water Master Will Make Water Rights Info More Accessible to Local Water Right Owners

by John D'Antonio, PE, New Mexico State Engineer

(SANTA FE, New Mexico) – To those citizens who attended the Mora Water Master Information Meeting on September 11 at the Mora High School Lecture Hall, I commend you all for your sense of community involvement and concern about water-related issues in your area.

I want to take this opportunity to dispel any lingering misconceptions regarding my intention to hire a Water Master for the Mora area.

This hiring is in response to frequent calls and letters received by the Office of the State Engineer from members of the Mora community asking for assistance in dealing with a variety of water-related issues, ranging from illegal water use and illegal impoundments to requests for assistance in filing an application to drill a well. Your requests have not gone unheard.

While the duties of the Water Master in the Mora area may be somewhat different than other areas, generally speaking, Water Masters actively administer the distribution of water from stream systems on a daily basis. They serve an important function because they ensure that water rights are protected and are distributed fairly among water right owners. A field office will be set up so that the Office of the State Engineer, through the Water Master, can be more accessible, and responsive and timely to your needs as water right owners.

It is not the duty of the Water Master to get involved in the internal dealings of acequias. There will be no apportioning of water, as that is the responsibility of the Mayordomo. If we're asked to help mediate or help you in some other way, we'll help you. If someone isn't adhering to your pre-determined rotation schedule, for example, the Water Master will help the Mayordomo enforce what was agreed to in the rotation schedule. What has been successful in other areas is for the Water Master to get people together to discuss challenges and come up with cooperative solutions, such as to discuss rotation schedules so that water resources can be shared in times of shortage. Also, the Water Master can help

link water right owners with agencies that can provide funding, for example, to correct deficiencies with infrastructure.

Neither the State Engineer nor the Water Master is here to take water rights away from anyone. This Water Master position is not being set up to specifically aid in an adjudication, but as is happening in the entire state of New Mexico, adjudication will happen, by state law, sometime in Mora, perhaps many years from now. Only a judge could take water rights away through the adjudication court as a result of forfeiture or non-use. In the event an adjudication process does occur in the near future, if you as a water right owner have continued to put your water rights to beneficial use, and have all your paperwork in order to prove it, such as documents, photographs, written testimony, and maps, presenting your case to the judge residing over the adjudication should go smoothly. The Mora Water Master will be available to help you by providing maps of properties along the main stem of the Mora River, as well as tributaries and springs, and how they feed into the Canadian River, using GIS technology.

The Mora Water Master will be available to assist individual water right owners by providing the forms to file Change of Ownership, Water Right Transfers, and Change of Point of Diversion, to obtain a permit to drill a new domestic well, and to file a declaration of a water right, and will assist the public in completing and filing the forms.

A responsibility of the Water Master will be to work with individual Mayordomos as well as the acequia community in a cooperative spirit to develop a Water Master Manual. The manual will include comprehensive guidelines for the duties of the Water Master and administration of the river.

The Mora Water Master position was advertised on June 4 and 6, 2008, in the Las Vegas Optic and of the 13 applicants that were interviewed, five applicants were from the Mora area. Members of the Mora Valley acequia community were invited to submit questions and to sit in on the interview process. We will be contacting acequia representatives to invite them to participate in the continuing process of candidate selection.

The Water Master will be paid for by the state and not by individual water right owners or acequia associations.

My intention is for continued cooperation among water right owners, with the Office of the State Engineer offering an on-going, positive, solution-oriented service to the people in the Mora area.

For more information, or to express a concern, please contact our Santa Fe office at (505) 827-6120.

The Office of the State Engineer is charged with administering the state's water resources. The State Engineer has power over the supervision, measurement, appropriation, and distribution of all surface and groundwater in New Mexico, including streams and rivers that cross state boundaries. The State Engineer is also Secretary of the Interstate Stream Commission and oversees its staff. The Interstate Stream Commission is charged with separate duties including protecting New Mexico's right to water under eight interstate stream compacts, ensuring the state complies with each of those compacts, as well as water planning.

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