

A century of federal indifference left generations of Navajo homes without running water

Written by Gallupsun Staff
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PART FIVE: More than what flows from the faucets

By Elizabeth Miller
New Mexico In Depth
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With water would come a greater chance of development in economically depressed communities in a corner of the state that is threatened with significant job losses due to the shuttering of several major employers. Tohatchi could add a supermarket, a restaurant, a fire department, a police station, or emergency services. The start-up Red Willow Farm could produce crops that would spare people a drive to Farmington, 90 minutes away. The footprint of an old boarding school could be converted into an office complex or housing for doctors and nurses who drive from Gallup to work in the clinic.

A laundromat could open. A restaurant could move into the empty half of the new post office building, giving residents an option other than the heated shelves at the convenience store, where customers can pick up a small pizza, burrito, or pre-made burger.

These aren't just conveniences. Unable to buy goods and services locally, tribal members spend their money outside their communities, and it rarely cycles back. This economic "leakage" keeps communities from becoming self-sustaining.

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That development would also curtail the flow of young people off the reservation, a trend former president of the Tohatchi Chapter Julie Badonie's own life followed. Leaving for school led to staying away for work. She took a job as a bookkeeper in the Navajo Nation's finance department, but didn't own a car, so she couldn't commute from Tohatchi, which straddles Highway 491. Instead, she lived in Gallup, about 25 miles south, where a bus ran to and from Window Rock, [Ariz.] on a schedule that matched her work hours.

After she married, her husband's job moved them around, but she was able to buy a car and keep her job in Window Rock, where she became an accounting clerk, then a supervisor. By the time she retired in 2003, she and her husband had built a log-sided house on land his grandmother owned three miles north of Tohatchi, and they had moved home.

A house or business can't be plumbed into a 48-inch trunk line. It would be like plumbing a fire hose into a kitchen sink. Smaller pipes must be installed for water to flow from kitchen taps and shower heads, to run laundry machines and flush toilets.

"The water is useless if that isn't done," the late New Mexico Sen. Pete Domenici said when the settlement went before Congress.

More than a decade after Congress agreed to this settlement, communities along the pipeline are still seeking funds to construct those smaller pipes, or waiting to reach the top of the Indian Health Service's project list. When there was no water to fill water lines, the Indian Health Service lacked incentive to build them. Now, the service could face the inverse of that problem.

"The problem is not a Navajo problem; it's a government problem and it's a bureaucracy problem and it's a problem that continues to center corporate interests or large-scale development schemes over the needs of everyday citizens."

Janene Yazzie, co-founder of Sixth World Solutions

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Tohatchi's officials secured enough money from the state to plan and design a pipeline, but nothing to construct it.

A binder inches thick describes the design, and maps of both the entire project and the local pipes hang on the chapterhouse wall. The price tag to build pipe from the trunk line to the community is estimated at \$9 million to Tohatchi and another \$4 million to Mexican Springs, which relies on Tohatchi's well.

New Mexico has distributed tribal infrastructure and capital outlay funds to help some communities, and the Navajo Nation has pitched in as well. Some communities, but not all, have secured the money to pipe water from the San Juan Lateral at least to a central watering point people can haul water from, if not to pipes that reach individual homes.

"We are finding some monies to do the connections to the system and right now, we're estimating we need about \$50 million to do these, to build these smaller regional systems to connect the project to existing systems," Jason John, director of the Navajo Nation Department of Water Resources said.

That's for communities that have water lines and will see improved quality or supply from the Navajo-Gallup Water Supply Project.

The Indian Health Service also lists thousands of homes across the Navajo Nation that don't have water at all, John said, and about \$500 million needed to deliver water there, which far outpaces annual funding.

"We're constantly tackling a huge list with just a limited amount of money," he said.

But this is also the piece that will matter most in the face of the next pandemic.

"If you want to think about this in the context of, how do you get water to people's homes like we

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do in other areas, there's a lot more work that needs to be done," Rolf Schmidt-Peterson, director of New Mexico's Interstate Stream Commission said. "From a pandemic standpoint, in the future, that's where we all want to be, but it's still a ways away. But the first thing we have to do is get the trunk line in."

When the Navajo Nation received \$600 million from the first emergency stimulus package after the pandemic, the CARES Act, its leaders talked about spending as much as \$300 million on water projects. The latest stimulus package, which President Joe Biden signed in March, also includes \$20 billion for tribal governments and another \$11 billion for federal programs that help support them.

The Secretary of the Treasury will determine how much money goes to each tribe. President Jonathan Nez has [said](#) he hopes the secretary considers the size, population, and devastating effects the Navajo Nation faced from COVID-19 last spring in deciding their allocation.

The Bureau of Indian Affairs has [directed](#) \$20 million to providing potable water. An upcoming major infrastructure package provides another opportunity to fund projects that could make a difference for generations.

The CARES Act money came with a spending deadline of Dec. 30, forcing permanent water projects to be shelved in favor of temporary fixes. It was the kind of stipulation that continues to impede tribes' abilities to do what local leaders, especially, recognize as the greatest needs for their community members.

"It takes years to build a water line. You can't get it done in months or weeks," John said. "The money did go toward some water projects, those that could be completed in a few weeks, like installing cistern systems. Maybe only one hundred of them were completed, and we're talking about thousands of homes that don't have water."

The Navajo Safe Water Project, developed specifically to increase water access during the pandemic, [reported](#) spending \$5.2 million in CARES Act money to install 59 transitional water points. Gravel and cement cover the ground under a water spigot and hose where people can fill barrels with potable water, alongside a small hand washing sink and jug of hand sanitizer. People can fill barrels there for free.

PANDEMIC MITIGATION

The Navajo Tribal Utility Authority and Navajo Engineering Construction Authority received about \$20 million to work on water systems, but delays meant some of that money had to be returned to Navajo Nation leaders. A lot of it went to a hardship fund to give money directly to people, John said.

When Badonie heard talk of giving that money out as \$1,500 to each family, she was incensed.

“What’s \$1,500 to a family, when that money is going to be gone in no time, compared to a waterline or a bathroom addition?” she asked.

Often, people who need water are scattered, their homes remote. It’s a few people per chapterhouse, maybe 25 people in Tohatchi, Badonie said, and in the next chapter north, Naschitti, another 15 to 20.

“It’s like that at every chapter on up the highway,” she said.

Some of these people may be out of reach indefinitely for any water pipeline. Indian Health Service staff told Badonie that if a few houses are grouped together, a water line can reach them. But for a single, remote homestead, it’s not feasible, even if more water is brought into the central part of the community.

“These are elders that don’t want to live in a town. They want to live where they were raised, in the rural areas,” Badonie said. “They have livestock still out there. They don’t want to leave where they were born. They want to keep their area, and live there, where they’re happy. So

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we're just going to go ahead and drill wells for them in the rural areas."

"Our elders need to live a quality of life also," she added. "We'd like to have the same quality of life as other U.S. citizens have."

Next week: THE CONCLUSION: *A deal climate change could bust*