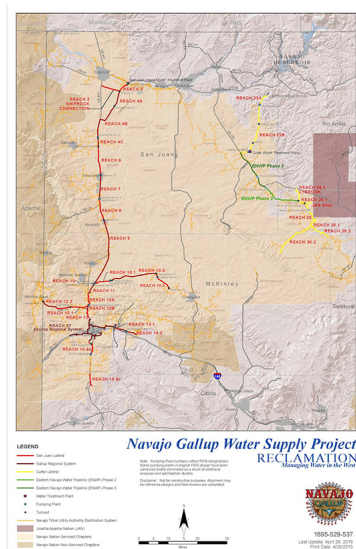


Part Two: Water brings possibilities

Written by Elizabeth Miller New Mexico In Depth April 12, 2021
Friday, 02 July 2021 06:35



Follow up to the story “A century of federal indifference left generations of Navajo homes without running water”

[Andrew] Robertson has focused his career on water access. He first worked along the U.S.-Mexico border in Texas, where he sometimes dug the trenches himself for a new pipeline. When he moved to New Mexico in 2000, he quickly saw Navajo communities facing the greatest need for that work. Working on construction projects has taken him all over the Navajo Nation.

After that meeting at [a chapterhouse in] Torreon, a local leader started rallying other chapters around the idea of a regional system, even before Congress approved the settlement for the Navajo Gallup Water Supply Project.

“The chapters got together ... and said, ‘We’re going to push for this project. Whether we get a settlement or not, we’re going to regionalize our water system. At the very least we’ll have a regional system among chapters to share water, so if one chapter’s well goes down, we can help them out,’” Robertson recalled.

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The Navajo Nation and State of New Mexico had signed a settlement around how much water the Navajo Nation could draw from the San Juan River, a tributary of the tightly allocated Colorado River, in 2005. But it was another four years before Congress approved that settlement, clearing the way for funding and construction to begin in 2012. That settlement included the Cutter Lateral, a far smaller project than the San Juan Lateral, at just 4,645 acre-feet per year compared to 37,000.

The environmental impact statement for the Navajo-Gallup Water Supply Project mapped a rough line marking a pipeline to that area, Jason John, director of the Navajo Department of Water Resources, said. Communities used that concept to route the pipeline to existing water systems, avoiding culturally sensitive sites and private property.

“The communities already had concrete plans on where the lines would be built, and some of it was already put into place,” John said. “They kind of got a running start before the federal funding from the settlement started flowing.”

They’d essentially put the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation in the position of playing catch up. But Robertson said those federal agencies also went on to collaborate and cooperate — to listen to what the people this pipeline was serving were asking for.

It hadn’t started out looking as though things would go that way.

When the federal government came to talk to Navajo Nation residents about the Navajo-Gallup Water Supply Project in summer 2007, they held a series of meetings in border towns and chapter houses as part of drafting the environmental impact statement. Navajo Nation residents drove hours to attend, only to find the explanatory video about the project ran only in English and not Navajo, and that they were given just a few minutes to talk.

Leonard Tsosie, a council delegate with the Navajo Nation representing Whitehorse Lake, Pueblo Pintado, and Torreon chapters and a former New Mexico state senator, said he’d come into the meeting optimistic.

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“On the way over I saw a rainbow over Crownpoint, and it was a good sign, and so I just want to mention that,” Tsosie said. “I think it’s a blessing. And also rain. I saw raindrops. So that’s a blessing. It’s a blessing because this is a matter of survival for our people and for the communities.”

He asked the federal staff to consider giving more time to the elders speaking in Navajo: “It’s also not too polite to cut them off. So if you could take that into account also, because they have a lot to say about this.”

“Thank you,” was all the hearing officer said in reply.

The meeting was about listening to people, not answering questions, but people had questions. Hadn’t there been a previous project? (There had been.) Didn’t it go farther east? Why were some places left out? Stories poured forth, too.

Robertson told the visiting federal officials that in the seven years he had worked on water projects for the eastern Navajo Agency, he’d seen a friend need surgery and spend days hospitalized because of years of chronic dehydration. Another friend’s father had a leg amputated because he didn’t have water to wash the pressure sores from his diabetes.

Next Week: PART THREE: *What happens to communities without water*

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