

On Land, Water and Culture in Northern New Mexico

Keynote for Forum I

I appreciate this opportunity.

I think what I want to convey might be framed from a viewpoint of what has transpired in this area--northern New Mexico/Taos--so let me give you some background on that. And my perspective is based on both personal and professional involvement.

I was born on a farming ranch in Arroyo Seco. The family, the extended family, had sheep, cattle, pigs, chickens, and grew grains, wheat, just about everything.

I followed my Dad everywhere he went. I had an interest in agricultural land and water. This led me to 4-H, vocational ag and then a couple of degrees from the College of Agriculture and Home Economics at New Mexico State University. I was a County Extension Agent, Resource Conservation and Development Specialist, a District Director. I retired and became even more involved than when I had been a professional with an agency. So maybe I can relate all those experiences to you very briefly.

I suggest we look at the northern New Mexico/Taos area from a historical perspective. There's a book by John Baxter titled *Las Carneradas*, that's interesting because it talks about the 18th and 19th cen-

turies in New Mexico, the markets being in Chihuahua, Mexico. Then later, it changed to San Francisco, through a northern route, central route, and so forth. That's very interesting. Some other things I found out at the New Mexico Supreme Court building is that there was an agricultural census taken every 10 years, like they do today. I made copies of several. By the way, there's a Culebra census--that's in southern Colorado that used to be part of Taos County. It's interesting to note the names. Somebody by the name of Pedro Valdez did a census in 1860. These are based on counties' individuals by name--how many horses, sheep, burros, or whatever they had. You look at the names and you see who was playing an active role in Taos County. For example, we're all aware of the Martinez Hacienda. Well, there's a Pasqual Martinez who was part of that family.

So, I found it interesting to look at all the communities. It gives you some sense of background. Also at the Supreme Court Building, there was a report by a historian that indicated there was a territorial water commission. And in 1896, or somewhere around there, the commission came back with a recommendation

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that indicated, "We find that the system in place works. We make no recommendations for changes." Well, that aroused my curiosity, and I went and found that there are statutes in the books every 10 years starting with the U.S. Constitution, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, etcetera. What caught my attention is that, for example, if you look at water for acequias, we have over-complicated everything. And I think the further we go, the more complicated things seem to become. But on a simple phrase, you got the gist of what was intended there. Anyway, I thought that was interesting.

Anybody ever hear that Taos and Mora counties were the grain centers of the West? Hard to believe. Maybe Mora, you can see more of the mills. They were here, too. In fact, the building across from Randall's Lumber and Hardware--that wooden building--used to be a mill. There were quite a few others spread around the area. The infrastructure, which I think might have been important, held livestock. But the cropping system--a lot of grain, a lot of wheat, a lot of horsepower, a lot of manpower, and there was mechanization. I recall that at my paternal grandfather's place, there still exists a grain harvester/thresher dating back to 1907. I thought that was interesting. But there were some other ones after that. There were steam tractors and so forth. What I gather from the

family is that they would probably begin the harvest some time in July and went around the valley harvesting. In November they came back. All of these might have contributed to that "grain center of the West" status.

Land surveys and title documents were rare and probably no more than a single page, and there were no courthouses to record them. That tended to complicate things. In fact, courthouses probably didn't come into existence until somewhere around the 1880s. I can tell you some of the complications that have developed because of that.

Anyway, then came World War II. And everything changed. Families were involved in a lot of agriculture. But at that point--and I get back to my family--two of my brothers were drafted. I happened to be very young at the time of World War II, so there I was, my Dad's helper. And I learned a lot through that experience in working with him. But everything changed. And then, at the end of the war, some of those soldiers found something somewhere else. Most of them left. A lot of families left. A lot of things changed. Land tenure changed. So the war had a major impact. Economics, as well, had a great change at that time. And that impacts part of what we're facing at this point. There was a lot of transition at that point. There was subsistence-agricultural units, part-

time units. The economics may or may not have been there, so things changed.

Just to give you an idea of some of the changes even more recently with the beginning of the water adjudication in Taos Valley. There are roughly 12,000 acres in the Taos Valley. In 1969, the average was probably four acres per family. Today, it's probably one and a half. And if you don't count some of the larger landowners, that average diminishes. So that gives you a picture of what's happening out in the area. The other major change--I think it had started happening earlier but maybe it accelerated beginning in the 1960s or so--people found Santa Fe and Taos and all the communities, and that also created a background for change. Land values skyrocketed. Some of our investment began maybe 1959 or '60. Land was selling for \$150 an acre. Hard to believe that today it's \$90,000. Are there implications to that? Very definitely--both good and bad. But anyway, it's part of the situation.

So the landownership pattern has changed. We have a lot of federal lands in the area. That also has changed. There were the traditional uses, initially, under the Spanish form of government--land grants and so forth, use of natural resources, grazing, livestock watering, timber and so forth. Then the Forest Service came into being in 1907. Then in the 1930s, the Homestead Act and

those kinds of things, created even more changes. The federal mandates were accelerated, probably beginning more so in the 1960s. Then at this point we have the NEPA (National Environmental Policy Act) process, Endangered Species Act, and a whole bunch of other things. All of these have impacted the agricultural and land-use patterns in New Mexico.

I was pleased to see that because of an uprising by land grant heirs in Tierra Amarilla, the northern New Mexico policy came into being in 1972 (the Northern New Mexico Policy recognized the uniqueness of northern New Mexico culture and sought to direct Forest Service activities to contribute to local economic and social needs). Bill Hurst was the regional forester with the U.S. Forest Service in Albuquerque who wrote the policy. I met with him some time back. He called me, and I didn't know what he wanted. He had a gruff voice that said, "I want to meet with you." And I thought, just what did I do? Anyway, I had a good visit with him. But his first question was, "What do people in northern New Mexico think of the northern New Mexico policy I instituted in 1972?" And it made me think, you know, a lot of people still recall that and what it meant then and what it means today. The only thing I told him is, "We forgot to say 'thank you' for doing what you did." That

was a good change.

The conflicts continue. There was a report done by Ben Mason and Tom Clevenger, Agricultural Economists from New Mexico State University--this goes back to the 1970s--titled "Improving the Viability of Agriculture in Northern New Mexico." It cites one major problem: lack of--or rather, a change in--infrastructure. It looks at mechanization--it doesn't exist. It looks at supply, services, markets--they're limited or do not exist. So that's a major problem.

Then there are some legal and institutional constraints that impact the whole agricultural issue. Water adjudications began in the 1960s. I welcomed that. I thought, "We need to have this." Today I'm wondering about the whole thing. It has really complicated the whole water issue--throughout New Mexico, by the way.

Taxation impacts agriculture also. In fact, I just got a copy of a proposal to double the taxes on livestock inspections. The profits are diminishing, but the taxes are increasing. Planning and zoning controls--neighbors don't want to see something happening with their neighbors--government mandates, they're all part of the picture. And on top of that, we have epidemics. Drought, tuberculosis--we have a situation in New Mexico at this point on shipping cattle out of state because of mad cow disease--economic impacts. All of these

form the framework of constraints to an agricultural economy.

Estate taxes. I know one family who virtually lost everything because of that. The father passed away, and the family had to do something, so they ended up being forced to sell everything to pay the taxes. I'm pleased to see that the recent administration has changed that. For example, the exemption per spouse is now \$1.5 million, beginning the year 2004, so that's a major relief to a lot of families.

Now, from an agricultural survival standpoint, we need some alternatives. Agricultural land use taxation--let's face it, you use it or you lose it. It's an incentive, so we'd better use it. In the 1970s, under Bill Hearst's initiative, Jean Hassel, who was a supervisor with the Santa Fe National Forest, instituted grazing associations. It's a management system where individuals didn't have to deal one-on-one with the federal agencies. You could deal with it as an entity. Some management shifts occurred at that point--I thought that was good. It also provided for some partnership. And I think there ought to be a partnership instead of "them-and-us."

Direct marketing opportunities are another good thing that has happened. Interestingly enough, there were farmers markets in the 1930s. But back in 1969, when I was still employed with the Cooperative

Extension Service, we began the Los Alamos Farmers Market. Jessie Rudlick with the League of Women Voters, came up with the idea. "Back East, we had farmers markets," she told us. "Why can't we have them here, so we can buy and sell fresh local produce directly?" Well, that led to a farmers market starting in Los Alamos. The following year, Santa Fe's came into being, and then Taos and Las Vegas, and it spread to Albuquerque, Tucumcari, Belen, and elsewhere in New Mexico. That was good. But direct marketing beyond farmers markets--pick-your-own operations, roadside markets and so forth--have evolved.

We need mechanization. We don't have the manpower for horses and other old-fashioned customs. I'm familiar and have been involved in some cooperative structures where a group of people share in the use of certain type of equipment. I think that can be explored further. I've seen it and it works.

Agricultural land-leasing agreements: The Roybal family from Nambé, their dad I recall indicated that they were probably the big farmers in area. They had a dairy in Nambé. Anyway, he indicated that they owned a lot of land but they also leased a lot of land from the neighbors. The problem was that the leases were informal, year-to-year. And if you want to invest, let's say, in planting a crop of alfalfa, you don't risk it if you don't have a long-term

lease. So you have to do something. That led to a publication with the Cooperative Extension Service on agricultural land leasing.

Organizational approaches are useful as well. The Valles Caldera is accommodating livestock producers from the area. We're initiating a conservation stewardship program this year. Individuals who had a problem with drought can participate. Rio Arriba County at one time, Hayden Gaylord from Ensenada indicated there might be a lot of private land here that used to be part of land grants that accommodates livestock from out of state. I checked the taxation records, and found out that about 25,000 head of livestock or steers came into Rio Arriba County annually. It probably hasn't changed, but he made one important point. He said that individual landowners wouldn't mind leasing to local people but they will not deal with 50 different individuals. But if you had an entity, they'd deal with that.

This week the Northern New Mexico Stockman's Association Board met to consider some of those things, grass banking, some of the more recent opportunities. Some professors of Ag Economics at New Mexico State University created the concept one time about exchanging land development rights. There's a publication on that, and that's an option, maybe less so in Taos at this

point. Most of the land in Taos is either owned or managed by the Forest Service and tribal lands, so the private lands are very limited, so I don't know how that would work here. Anyway, the concept is that you could transfer development rights from arable farmland owned by someone like the Bureau of Land Management to private land that is less productive. Then the BLM would allow individuals to use those development rights on the private land and the farmland is preserved forever.

There are some opportunities regarding estate planning. From a water standpoint, the "use-it-or-lose-it" proposition is there. And viable conservation--I'm pleased to see that the Taos Soil and Water Conservation District is very actively involved in conservation projects, water banking (we have a presentation on that later), management entities, partnerships. I attended a conference in Durango one time, and learned how the Colorado Nature Conservancy had partnered with Steamboat Springs, Colorado, to save a ranch from development. I thought that was interesting. The Nature Conservancy could see it's in our interest to promote ranching because that means open land. So they partnered in promoting beef. I hope they're still doing it, despite the mad cow scare.

Other protections need to be considered, and I know several people are working on them.

They're called limited-liability corporations, and in some instances they've created corporations, small corporations in most instances. And then there's the farmland protection that the Taos Land Trust is involved in. Santa Fe County has something, possibly through a bond issue, where they fund a certain amount to buy lands to set aside as protected. I know they have bought one ranch that I can think of specifically, somewhere around the Santuario de Chimayo, and preserved some land there. But it continues to be used as agricultural land, not just open space.

There are many other features there. Other states have good legal provisions for farmland protection. Some states actually buy the land, but then allow the farmers to continue producing on it. But it protects the farmlands. To me, agricultural viability is essential. But they must be feasible enterprises. And if we can't be dependent on government, what can we do ourselves to make it viable? It needs to have local support. Buy local fresh produce. Farmers markets are part of that. We want to see it that way, but we're not willing to support it. We need to make some commitments there, I think. And then, I'm an environmentalist, but there are some environmental consequences. For example, kicking people

out of livestock grazing on national forest land has an unintended consequence of putting someone out of business, and what's their option? They might have to consider splitting it, selling it--and it's going to accelerate unless we do something from that standpoint; we need to get that message across. I think it's important.

Thank you.

