

The Right To Water Here At Home

Communities Fight For Social & Environmental Justice

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The question of whether water is a fundamental human right or a market commodity comes into sharp relief when poor communities, often communities of color, find their access to affordable, clean water out of reach as both industry and agriculture waste and pollute local water supplies and fast-growing urban centers suck water for lawns and pools. In California, the Environmental Justice Coalition for Water, and in New Mexico, the New Mexico Acequia Association, are helping communities fight for their rights.

CA: Water is a Human Right

In California, agribusiness and industry elites profit from the right to use water at very low cost. Today agribusiness is selling their right to use water to water-hungry cities at huge mark-ups. This market-based re-allocation, combined with pollution from agribusiness and industry, leaves poorer communities thirsting for water. Now they are fighting back, but it is not easy. Here are two examples.

In the Central Valley of California, home to large corporate farms, a small Hispanic community of farmworkers, near Fresno, with contaminated wells from pesticide runoff, organized and got county and state funds to dig one deep well accessing clean water and to build a public system. Still each house must pay \$1000-\$3000 to connect up—an almost insurmountable hardship without further assistance.

In one community in Monterey County, desperate, low-income residents were faced with exorbitant rate hikes by Cal-Am, owned by RWE. Rates increased from a \$21 flat monthly rate to as high as

\$430. Unable to pay their water bills, they drove 150 miles to a Public Utilities Commission hearing in San Francisco to protest the excessive rate increases. As a result of their protest, the PUC reinstated a lower flat rate.

Now communities across the state, faced with pollution of their wells and other local water supplies, are coming together to demand safe and affordable drinking water. They are demanding that the state fund health studies to document and treat diseases caused by pollution in their communities and fund the clean-up.

NM: Managing Water as a Commons

In New Mexico, local Indo-Hispanic communities in this semi-arid region have for centuries relied on the traditional acequia system of irrigation and allocation among users, based on cooperative local self-governance. An "acequia" refers to the community of farmers that cooperatively maintain the ditches and share the water through custom and tradition so that community needs are met for irrigating crops and grazing animals. Water is directed into the *acequia madre* (mother ditch) so the *aquador* (water master) can allocate water to local users through irrigation channels.

As Paula Garcia, Executive Director of the New Mexico Acequia Association emphasizes: "we view water as the lifeblood of our communities because water brings us together as a community and water is essential to the continued survival of our way of life. Today, a severe drought combined with competing demands for water from agribusiness, industry and growing cities, have combined to put the historic acequia water rights in jeopardy." Competing water rights claims are ending up in court—a long, expensive process that pits the acequia communities against state and federal agencies. The New Mexico Acequia Association advocates using the acequia approach to resolve individual disputes rather than relying on courts and also using the concept statewide to prevent any one community or group of people from being disenfranchised and their way of life threatened.

As these communities stand up for their right to water as a matter of social and environmental justice, they become a part of the global movement for the right to water stretching from Cochabamba's mobilization against Bechtel to Rajasthan India's movement aimed at Coca-Cola to the villages of China polluted by factories feeding the global market.

Resources: Thirsty for Justice: A People's Blueprint for California's Water, The Environmental Coalition for Water, 2006 www.ejcw.org; The New Mexico Acequia Association www.acequiaweb.org



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