

What happens to a community without water

Written by By Elizabeth Miller New Mexico In Depth April 12, 2021
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Part Three of the follow up to the story “A century of federal indifference left generations of Navajo homes without running water”

The absence of water cascades. In addition to complicating every step of daily life — from washing hands, to making stew or having a cup of tea, to doing the dishes afterwards, it drives up illnesses and complicates public health issues. No water meant a school wasn’t built in Torreon, and other buildings were abandoned because of dry taps. Businesses didn’t open, medical clinics couldn’t operate, jobs drifted away.

Whitehorse Lake Chapter and Pueblo Pintado had both been denied housing — the square, stucco-sided houses with peaked roofs housing agencies often construct — because there was no water for those houses. People who might have preferred to stay where they grew up, moved to cities to have running water. [Leonard] Tsosie,[a council delegate with the Navajo Nation representing Whitehorse Lake, Pueblo Pintado, and Torreon chapters and a former New Mexico state senator,] called it “the brain drain” and “the people drain.”

“When there’s no water, there’s no developments,” Chee Smith Jr. [of Whitehorse Lake] told federal officials. “So we’re kind of still like in the — kind of like a third-world nation.”

Frank Willetto, who had lived in Pueblo Pintado for 50 years and served as its chapter president since 1986, said Pueblo Pintado, by his count, is 70 miles from Farmington, 48 miles from Crownpoint, 100 miles from Gallup.

“So we’re out there,” he told the visiting officials in 2007. “A lot of people say ‘nowhere,’ but we know where we are.”

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The chapterhouse had a public high school, a Bureau of Indian Affairs boarding school, an Indian Health Service clinic, and a store, but not even half of their residents had water.

“The chapter is trying to get water to each hogan or house or trailer house,” he said. “When you don’t do things for your community, that means you are doing bad things for that community. And water is number one that we need.”

Willetto, who had been awarded the Congressional Silver Medal for his service as a Navajo Code Talker during World War II, had been denied veteran’s benefits to build a house because there were no fire hydrants in his community. He would be taken to Congress to tell that story again as lawmakers considered approving the settlement between the Navajo Nation and the state of New Mexico, and he’d go to Washington, D.C. on the day President Obama signed the bill approving the settlement. But he didn’t live long enough to see water in the pipes.

“The communities regard the water project as a priority,” Tsosie said. “They’ve been waiting a lifetime for this.”

Before the Cutter Lateral broke ground in Whitehorse Lake, a traditional Navajo medicine man blessed the earth on which it would be built, the people who would work on the project, and the communities who would receive its water. Again, when the Bureau of Reclamation and Navajo Nation Water Commission began construction on the lateral’s water treatment facility, the ground was blessed, and again, when everything was finished last fall.

“It’s spiritual. I don’t know how I would describe it — the same way as a person praying in a church, I guess. Asking the lord for spiritual help, spiritual guidance,” Smith said. “That it will happen, that it will help our people, and nothing will get in the way. ... That’s what we bless it for, and that it will help our people.”

Even the reservoir, a pool of blue nestled among a maze of mesas in northern New Mexico, miles from the San Juan River that feeds its water and far down dirt roads from any town, was blessed. The reservoir sits above Blanco Canyon, where a single lane bridge crosses a section of the dry wash. Signs caution to yield to oncoming traffic, and watch for flash floods, which

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could swamp a car in the depression between where the bridge ends and the riverbank climbs out of the floodplain. Tamarisks line the banks, their bare branches red in winter.

A few houses perch on promontories overlooking the empty riverbed and the canyon walls, where lines of junipers mark layers in the rock and dirt. Propane tanks and firewood sit alongside the houses. School bus stops appear on the side of some of the graded dirt roads, sometimes where there's not a house in sight.

Blue posts dot the horizon, marking the buried pipeline. The line weaves among more prevalent natural gas pipelines, marked with yellow posts. All of it has the beginnings of a grown-over, nondescript look, as though it has been there for ages.

PART FOUR: CONCLUSION: Water reaches the communities

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