

Water reaches the communities

Written by By Elizabeth Miller New Mexico In Depth April 12, 2021
Friday, 27 August 2021 07:41



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

The first piece of the Navajo Gallup Water Supply Project began running in October.

Water came first to Huerfano, the closest community to the source, at the start of a six-month testing phase. Other communities will come online this year, all the way to Jicarilla Apache land.

For some communities, the project means access to running water. For others, the groundwater quality is poor, so this connects residents with water they might actually enjoy drinking, moves them off increasingly strained groundwater wells, and reduces risk of exposure to heavy metals, which are known to be prevalent in New Mexico’s groundwater. In others, more water means a chance to grow.

“All things they need, and things we take for granted like schools and gas stations, they couldn’t build because there wasn’t enough water to provide those services,” [Andrew] Robertson, [a civil engineer with Souder, Miller and Associates], said.

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The first 24 hours the pumps ran for the Cutter Lateral, Robertson slept in the pumphouse. Though it dropped down to 50 degrees that autumn night, the engines kept the building so hot that he turned on the air conditioning. Noise filled the room, and he slept, listening for rattling, a shift in the hum, or anything else that indicated a problem.

“Just to make sure,” he said. “After all this time, I wanted to make sure everything was good.”

Whitehorse Lake sits in an arid, treeless landscape. Smith moved away for college and worked as a civil engineer in Tucson for eight years. But the heat proved unbearable and he missed home and the friends he’d grown up with, who had been left wondering what had happened to him. So he went to work as an engineer for the BIA [Bureau of Indian Affairs] and moved back to Whitehorse Lake. That time away, a college degree, and his work as a civil engineer, he said, prepared him to get things done for his chapter.

“This is my homeland, it’s where I grew up and my relatives still live out here,” [Chee] Smith [Jr. of Whitehorse Lake], said. “You know how it is, I’m just used to being out here because that’s where I was raised, and I like this place.”

One paved road connects Whitehorse Lake to Grants, 50 miles away, which takes a solid hour to drive. People drive that far or farther, to Gallup or Farmington, both about an hour and a half away, Smith said, “to go grocery shopping or just to get a hamburger.”

The closest police station is in Crownpoint, 40 minutes away. Even until a few years ago, to make calls on their cell phones, people living in Whitehorse Lake had to drive miles to find a signal. They’d park on the side of the road while they talked. The only alternative was to use the office phone at the chapterhouse, which also housed a shower that residents pay to use.

Electricity is also still missing from some homes, as are indoor bathrooms. All the services in the chapter come from the chapterhouse and senior center.

“I guess the big issue is, people just don’t want to live out here, because there’s no stores, the roads are dirt, so I guess that’s why we ran out of business,” Smith said.

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Whitehorse Lake wasn't originally on the map for the Navajo Gallup Water Supply Project, but when chapters in that area began organizing a regional water system, they decided to include a pipeline between it and Pueblo Pintado, about a dozen miles from Whitehorse Lake, and divided from it by the long buttress of tawny sandstone that is Chaco Mesa.

"The eight chapters decided they weren't going to leave anyone out," Robertson said. "So [when] Whitehorse Lake said 'We want to be part of this, and we're going to step up,' the other chapters who had put their own money into it said they were okay with some of their money going to support Whitehorse Lake. Think about that for a minute — it's like people in Bernalillo County saying we're okay with our money helping people in McKinley County."

The water flowing into the Cutter Lateral system will eventually reach all the way to Whitehorse Lake. With water, Smith hopes more stores, a gas station, and a laundromat, saving the drive to Gallup or Grants to wash clothes, could follow for Whitehorse Lake and Pueblo Pintado.

"Years ago, when we asked for stores, housing, stuff like that, and they'd tell us, 'There's no water. We can't do it,'" Smith said. "There's no excuses anymore. They can't say there's no water. We have water now — so start building."

With water, Smith said, it's time the Navajo Tribal Housing Authority reconsider allowing construction. Smith still attends meetings with updates on the San Juan Lateral, the bigger piece of the Navajo-Gallup Water Supply Project, and encourages other communities with water on the way, to push for development. In Crownpoint, a bit of a headquarters for the region, he's encouraging officials to think about everything from fast food to banks to colleges.

"I want to see development, see improvements for my people," Smith said. "That's what keeps me going ... I want to see better things for my people."

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