

N.M. Lawmakers Introduce Aamodt & Abeyta Indian Water Settlement Legislation

from the Office of Senator Pete V. Domenici

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-- Bill Authorizes Two Indian Water Settlement Agreements in Northern New Mexico --

WASHINGTON, D.C. – U.S. Senators Pete Domenici and Jeff Bingaman, as well as Representative Tom Udall, today introduced legislation to authorize settlements for two long-standing Indian water rights cases in northern New Mexico.

The Aamodt and Taos Pueblo Indian Water Rights Settlement Act of 2008 (S.3381) introduced in both the Senate and House Thursday, would resolve Indian water rights claims associated with the Rio Pojoaque Basin (Aamodt) and the Taos Pueblo Indian Water Rights Settlement (Abeyta case).

The legislation is based on years of extensive negotiations between many parties, including Indian, local, state and federal parties. The outcome of those talks will assure water resources for the pueblos while providing for the current and future water needs of non-Indian interests in north-central New Mexico.

"These negotiated settlements demonstrate that multiple parties can successfully work together to best determine how to allocate scarce water supplies among diverse parties in a way that ensures that our obligations to the pueblos are met and that they, along with other users, will have safe and reliable water systems," Domenici said. "This bill sets the stage for the next Congress to enact these settlements, which will also improve the ability of New Mexico to effectively undertake water rights planning in the near and long-term future."

"These water claims languished for decades in federal court, leaving New Mexicans uncertain about the future," Bingaman said. "This legislation would enact into law the negotiated settlements that pueblos, local government and other interested parties have worked so hard to produce."

"This legislation is evidence that all of the groups and cultures that depend on New Mexico's scarce water supply can come together and find solutions to our common challenges," said Udall. "I was pleased to work with pueblos, historic acequia associations and growing communities to develop this mutually beneficial plan for New Mexico's future. This legislation will set a precedent of respect and compromise—a precedent that will help us move into the future with well established partnerships and a commitment to conserve and manage our vital resources to the benefit of all."

The bipartisan legislation would authorize the Secretary of the Interior, acting through the Commissioner of Reclamation, to develop water infrastructure in the Rio Grande Basin, and to approve the settlement of the water rights claims of the Nambé, Pojoaque, San Ildefonso, Tesuque and Taos pueblos.

The Aamodt settlement includes the construction of a regional water system in and around Santa Fe County that will benefit the pueblos and their non-pueblo neighbors. Project construction plus other benefits to the pueblos are expected to cost the Federal government approximately \$160 million within the next decade. The state of New Mexico and Santa Fe County are expected to contribute approximately \$70 million towards the cost of the project.

Implementing the Taos Settlement requires funding a number of small projects to help improve water use efficiency, groundwater management; and improve water quality in the Taos Valley. The pueblo will also receive direct funding to manage its water resources. In total, the Taos settlement is expected to cost the Federal government approximately \$114 million. The state of New Mexico is expected to contribute approximately \$15 million to the effort.

The Aamodt-Abeyta settlement legislation represents two of the three pending Indian water settlements pending in New Mexico. In April, the lawmakers introduced legislation to authorize the settlement reached to resolve the Navajo Nation's water rights claims in the San Juan River Basin.