

Building El Creston's wells, treatment and transmission system

Building a water delivery system is not an easy thing. It takes the involvement and sacrifice of citizens who must strive to understand the often-baffling complexities of local, state and federal regulations over the course of several years. Fortunately, our area has such people who take time from their busy lives to contribute their skills to meet the needs of their neighbors.

El Creston has been working to solve short and long-term needs since 2009 when wells in the area began to go dry. After seeing to immediate needs, El Creston's board of directors developed a plan for a deep community well and a system of pipes distributing water to homes that would meet the needs of fire protection and domestic use for a service area north and south of I-25.

The system's first stage will consist of a deep well and treatment facility in the Ojitos Frios Ranches area with a pipeline leading to a fill station at the corner of Mirasol and County Road A20. The fill station will be for the convenience of those with dry private wells to fill tanks and avoid having to drive into town. Second stage of the system is a pipeline to the Sheridan Volunteer Fire Station. Sheridan fire trucks must now go at least to Tecolote go obtain water because there is no producing well at the station.

Here, in detail, is El Creston's recent history and how it plans to build the system.

What El Creston has done so far

After dealing with immediate needs by declaring a drought emergency, El Creston set to squaring away our status as a public utility so we could work with federal and state government on finding a solution. To meet the urgent needs of our neighbors, we obtained a loan from the state and started a water hauling service open to everyone in our community, regardless of membership status. We made over 120 deliveries in 2010 - 2011 and paid our first loan installment.

By mid-2010 we secured \$75,000 in loans from the New Mexico Finance Authority and the U. S. Department of Agriculture, allowing us to hire Souder Miller and Associates to develop a Preliminary Engineering Report (PER) and Environmental Report (ER). These showed the water system is feasible. With that, we focused on the many steps needed to get system funding. Most of that energy went toward a funding application to the New Mexico Water Trust Board. The funding was to cover design and construction of the first components of our community water system: the well, storage tank, some distribution line, and a water fill station. We developed our first Infrastructure Capital Improvement Plan (ICIP) and submitted it to the New Mexico Department of Finance and Administration. This is one of several administrative actions needed for us to receive construction funding from state sources.

Early 2012 we learned that our Water Trust Board application passed numerous reviews and was recommended for funding by the legislature. The final Water Trust Board decision resulted in funding only the design and construction, about \$100,000, including a \$10,000 loan we must repay. This was an enormous accomplishment for a first time applicant.

We examined additional funding resources throughout the year. We made several unsuccessful attempts to access state and federal emergency funding. Despite the Governor's declaration of a drought emergency, El Creston's emergency did not meet the criteria for emergency assistance. We also sought planning funds through the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) program, administered through the state's Department of Finance and Administration. The County denied our request due to perceived inadequacy of El Creston's public participation process. We tried to obtain CDBG funds through San Miguel County. The county ranked El Creston in its top five fundable projects for its Infrastructure Capital Improvement Plan, but declined to submit

our project to CDBG due to uncertainty that it could be completed within the required two years if the well wasn't successful.

We submitted a funding application letter of interest to the Drinking Water State Revolving Fund, an Environmental Protection Agency loan fund administered by the New Mexico Finance Authority and New Mexico Environment Department. While our project rated high for its need and technical merits, it not considered due to El Creston's lack of a current, rate paying customer base.

With a better understanding of the funding realities, El Creston focused on a new application to the Water Trust Board (WTB), this time for construction funding. We are using the same basic proposal that was so well regarded by the WTB application reviewers last year, and with planning and design effectively complete, we are asking for nearly a million dollars. We will use it to construct the well, storage tank, some distribution line with a few household connections, fire hydrants, and a water fill station at the junction of Mirasol and County Road A20. If our funding request is approved, we will take on \$100,000 in debt and must contribute a further \$150,000 of match, in the form of in-kind services and hard (cash) match. We are seeking assistance from the state Legislature for the match component. We will cover the debt through water sales and, to a lesser extent, through assessments. The Water Trust Board approved \$998,855 for phase I construction to start in 2014.

Our water hauling continues to provide a vital service to the community. We made over 120 deliveries to 25 different families in 2012.

Looking down the road

We will do more focused planning to fund the extension of the system to the fire station and the adjacent communities. We will also continue to pursue options to get a well in the Sheridan area, as outlined in our Preliminary Engineering Report.

To succeed, we need a stronger membership base. Though at over 50 members we are larger than some other Mutual Domestics, our service area is quite large and relatively disconnected. We need to get the rest of the property owners along the route of our first distribution line enrolled. This is our first, but not our only membership priority. We also need the interest and enthusiasm of new members throughout the community in order to give funding agencies the confidence that this project is desired and feasible. Only members enrolled at the time of construction will have their water meters paid for through the grants and loans we obtain. Each meter will cost at least \$1,200. There will likely be other cost associated with connecting households that were not members at the time of construction. We strongly encourage all local residents, members and non-members to learn about our activities and provide input and feedback. Of course, we also encourage all property owners to join El Creston.