

Phil Griego

His Life, Career, & Contributions

“Water issues are controversial. ... But then, very few topics discussed in this committee *won't* be controversial,” says Senator Phil Griego, chairman of the Water and Natural Resources Committee. In the New Mexico legislature Senator Griego represents district 39, covering parts of San Miguel, Santa Fe, Mora, Taos, Los Alamos, and Sandoval counties. The senator also maintains membership on several other legislative committees, including the Economic and Rural Development Committee, where critical legislation for Northern New Mexico communities emerges and works in tandem with his work on water issues.

Senator Griego anticipated a series of lively discussions in the Water and Natural Resources Committee this year about speeding up the adjudication process, the Middle Rio Grande Conservancy District and the independence of acequias within its boundaries, and inter-basin transfers of water rights, among other issues. His role as chairman will require that he work to keep on point a roomful of legislators each wanting to say his or her piece on topics that trigger emotional responses from most New Mexicans. When asked which subject he feels most passionately about, Senator Griego answers emphatically: “My acequias.”

Phil Griego grew up in a farming family. He was born in Santa Fe, but his father had a ranch in San Jose, within the San Miguel de Valle land grant. He always had a “feel for the land. I would go with my dad to irrigate, do the things that had to be done.” He was the only one in the family, he said, who was able to step up. Despite that predilection, however, as a young man he thought he'd become a corporate lawyer. “But I ended up a family farmer.”

After attending St. Michaels High School in Santa Fe and the College of Santa Fe, the young Griego went away to law school at Antioch in Washington D.C. When he returned home, he was drawn into public service. His father and grandfather had been politicians; they were Republicans. But his experiences outside of New Mexico had altered his perspective. When there was a vacancy on the Santa Fe city council, he ran as a Democrat. He won his seat, and later, starting in 1985, served as mayor pro-tem of Santa Fe for about eight years.



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Then his community of farmers began to tug at his heart. “My area wasn’t being represented well. The acequias were falling apart. . . . I needed to do this thing.” In 1996, he ran successfully for the state senate.

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“My acequias are the most important thing. They are the lifeblood of rural communities. They’ve got to be taken care of. They should not be looked at as a ‘thorn in one’s side.’ That’s often the feeling in the legislature. Yes, they’re cultural, but more so: the lifeblood.” And, Senator Griego points out, it’s not just a northern New Mexico feeling. “You’d be surprised at how many people come from the south concerned about their acequias.”

Senator Griego, who recently spoke to a group of students at a charter school in Taos for a “water learning day,” is impressed by the knowledge and interest of young people in water issues. “Younger people are thinking about water in a whole different way.” They are looking more at working on farms and gardens, but are also concerned about issues like contamination, for example.

He attributes this resurgence in interest to acequias’ importance not only to rural irrigation-based communities, but also to urban centers. “Growth of food—growth of crops—is nourishment of urban communities. Farmers’ markets are taking hold in urban communities again.” Some of this is thanks to the New Mexico Acequia Association, he said. “It hasn’t been in existence for that long.” The Association has requested and received funding that has allowed acequias to maintain their water distribution systems and grow small farms. “This has been a major stepping stone for rural communities. You can go into my area now and find three or four greenhouses in production. Farmers are contracting with Santa Fe restaurants to distribute their produce.” This entices young people, he said, because markets for their labor are being re-created. “Their efforts don’t fall by the wayside.”

Senator Griego lives with his wife Jane in the Village of San Jose. They have three grown children and seven grandchildren. He has a “dual-citizenship” in his professional life, he says. He is an active rancher in San Miguel County, as well as serving as a consultant on real estate development, planned communities, and investment for a partnership he formed with his daughter, Darla Griego Mier. Senator Griego draws from this spectrum of roles to work on behalf of his constituents, paying particular attention to keeping water—the lifeblood—flowing on their land.

By Lisa Brown

