



PICTURED: Jesse Gomez, Bluewater, New Mexico/T. Brunner

# Volunteer Ingenuity Keeps Water Flowing in Bluewater, New Mexico

## Rural Community Water Systems

By Terry Brunner

Jesse Gomez of Bluewater, New Mexico, is seldom seen these days without a dapper looking fedora. I strongly suspect he is the sharpest dresser in the entire Bluewater area. The truth is Jesse has been wearing many hats throughout his life.

He's run an auto repair shop, worked for the State of New Mexico, and worked in the treacherous uranium industry -- but those were just day jobs. While he worked, Jesse moonlighted as a volunteer on the board of the Northwest New Mexico Action Program, overseeing Head Start and other vital assistance programs for citizens in a five-county area. Today, he is technically "retired" from the working world, but not really retired. His volunteer work keeps him very busy.

Jesse currently serves as President of the Bluewater Mutual Domestic Water Users Association. If you live in rural New Mexico the odds are good you get your drinking water from one of more than 700 community water systems around the state, often known as "Mutual Domestic Water Users Associations." These organizations might be small 15-user systems in a place like Quail Hollow, New Mexico or larger like the 1,700 residential water consumers in Rio Communities, New Mexico. They operate like any big-city water system -- they bill their customers and they make certain water is there when people turn on the faucet. The difference is they are not run by government employees. They are run for the most part by local volunteers.

Included in that bunch is Jesse Gomez. The community of Bluewater (population 628) is located about 20 miles south of I-40 just west of Grants, New Mexico next to Bluewater Lake State Park. It's a lovely spot, nestled between mesas and the Zuni Mountains. The water in Bluewater Lake is definitely blue and it is rumored to be one of the state's better fishing spots.

For years the Bluewater water system consisted of a set of small-diameter pipes (what you might use on your lawn's sprinkler system) that originated from an old tank and well sending water to 170 homes. Bluewater sits in a hilly area, and those little pipes weren't equipped to force water uphill or at a distance with enough water pressure for showers and faucets.

Mr. Gomez sought out hundreds of thousands of dollars in funding for a new tank and new lines to

successfully modernize the local water system. As he tells it, he "brought the water association from a pair of rusty vice-grips and a screwdriver to a business that is worth in excess of \$900,000."

This is not an unusual story in New Mexico. Many New Mexico water systems were thrown together with what was available at the hardware store or what could be provided from a local contractor. I'll never forget seeing what masqueraded as a water system in the community of Low Mesa south of Alamogordo -- it consisted of a water well connected to an old oil drum with PVC pipe bought from Home Depot (50 homes were on that system).

Water systems require constant upkeep and small communities like Bluewater are in a never-ending battle to scratch and claw for any grant and loan funding they can find from the State and Federal government. New Mexico's immediate water infrastructure needs are estimated to be well above \$100 million. Water board volunteers, like Jesse, not only have to navigate the challenging world of billing your neighbors and providing them dependable water, but also have to figure out complex financing arrangements and government paperwork.

The issue of water availability in New Mexico is not just about where the water is going to come from, but who is going to get it out to people and how. No two ways about it, our water board volunteers are getting older and in the next decade we stand to lose much of their vast experience and knowledge if younger folks don't step up and take their place. The future of water availability in rural areas depends on those volunteers

Whether its volunteer firemen, school volunteers, church volunteers, or volunteer water board members those individuals keep needed services in place in rural communities. Jesse Gomez has been successful in keeping the water flowing in Bluewater but it takes a lot of hard work and ingenuity. No doubt those years of experience he gained from wearing many hats helped a bunch. ●