

STUDY SUBJECTS HONORED

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Photo by Ruth Heide

Environmental Protection Agency staff and award recipients gather Thursday in Alamosa. From left are EPA staff Art Palomares and Tami Thomas Burton, award recipients Christine Canaly, Lupita Garcia, Cindy Medina and Evelyn Vigil and EPA Acting Assistant to the Regional Administrator Eddie Sierra.

EPA recognizes Valley water project

Coordinators receive awards

By RUTH HEIDE

ALAMOSA — For area residents becoming ill from their drinking water, the San Luis Valley Drinking Water Well Project was a lifesaver.

More than 400 households participated in the project last summer to determine the quality of their well water. They were given free kits to collect their own water samples for testing and dropped off those samples at Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) remote labs throughout the Valley during the summer of 2006. Nearly a third of those household wells, 28.5 percent, tested positive for bacteria, explained Costilla County Commission Chairman Ed Vigil who served on the local steering committee for the project. Also found in the well water were arsenic, lead, nitrates and uranium.

San Luis Valley Ecosystem Council Director Christine Canaly, who coordinated the project, related one instance in which a woman's kidneys and liver were starting to shut down and she was feeling ill. She had no idea her medical condition was due to her drinking water, Canaly said, until her well was tested and found to contain uranium.



Costilla County Commission Chairman Ed Vigil provides the background on the water quality project that won Environmental Protection Agency awards for San Luis Valley participants. Lupita Garcia, right, is one of the award recipients.

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Evelyn Vigil, CEO of Sangre de Cristo Labs in Alamosa who set up the water testing process and helped educate the public, said some of the people whose well water was tested had been sick and had no idea it was due to their drinking water. "Some of them had E.coli in their drinking water," she said. When they remedied the problem and came back to repeat the test on their well water, they told her they never had an idea this could happen to private well water. Some of them told her they thought groundwater was all good, she said. "If it had not been for this study, they would never have known."

Recognizing the importance of the well-testing project, the EPA presented Friend of Environmental Protection Awards to local project leaders on Thursday in Alamosa. Canaly and Evelyn Vigil were two of the award recipients as were Cindy Medina, Alamosa Riverkeeper and member of the International Waterkeeper Alliance who coordinated the project in Conejos County; Lupita Garcia who at the time of the project was the director of the SLV Information Center and coordinated the project in Rio Grande and Mineral Counties; DeAnna Wilfong, board secretary of ScSeed (Saguache County Sustainable Environment & Economic Development) who coordinated the project in Saguache; and Vivian Gallegos, Costilla County Nursing Service director who coordinated the project in San Luis and Fort Garland.

Assisting Medina in Conejos County were Laurie Quintana, Ray Lara, Linda DeHerrera and Barbara Smith.

Ed Vigil said this project began in 2005 when Valley residents



Photo by Ruth Heide

Environmental Protection Agency Acting Assistant to the Regional Administrator Eddie Sierra, right, makes a presentation during an awards ceremony in Alamosa on Thursday. At left is one of the EPA award recipients Cindy Medina, and standing in the center is EPA Director of Environmental Justice Region 8 Art Palomares.

partnered with the EPA "to ensure that we had clean drinking water for the San Luis Valley." He said about 30 percent of the Valley's residents get their drinking water from private wells.

"It is important we have clean water, and it is important our citizens have safe drinking water," Vigil said.

Canaly said residents participated in this project voluntarily, and she was pleased with how the EPA staff, particularly Environmental Justice Coordinator Tami Thomas-Burton assisted local coordinators in making this project successful.

She said the ecosystem council received a Community Problem Solving grant that will build on this project "to make this a more sustainable

program in the San Luis Valley."

Evelyn Vigil will continue working with the EPA under this new grant and will help coordinate water quality data at her facility.

EPA Acting Assistant to the Regional Administrator Eddie Sierra said he appreciated how the community worked with his staff on this project. He said the EPA is charged with protecting human health and the environment, but the agency cannot do it alone and needs partners like those in the Valley who participated in this project.

He said this was very positive and beneficial for the Valley community.

"I appreciate the opportunity you gave us to come here and work with you."