

Andes water dispute illustrates balance between climate, livelihood

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The snowy peaks of Peru's Cordillera Blanca provide a scenic backdrop for a gathering of Quechua-speaking villagers on the shore of Lake Paron in 2009. Now that control of the lake has returned to the government, local villagers hope to increase their income by promoting tourism in the region. (CNS/Walter Hupiu)

CRUZ DE MAYO, PERU -- The government officials who came to this small farming community to convince farmers to stop blocking access to a disputed lake were taken by surprise at the start of the meeting.

Instead of angry words, the farmers -- who had blocked the road to the lake since mid-2008 -- began with prayer. Reading scripture, praying in their native Quechua language, and reciting the Our Father and Hail Mary in Spanish, they commended their community to God, who created the earth and the water on which they depend for the crops that provide their livelihood, and asked God to lead them to a peaceful solution.

A solution was crucial, because heavy rains had raised the lake to a dangerous level. If the community did not allow officials to open the sluice gates and drain some of the water, there was a risk that the dam could break, sending a torrent of water, mud and rock cascading down the mountain to Caraz, a city of 17,000 people in the valley below.

The farmers, however, were afraid that as soon as they lifted the roadblock and gave up the key to the padlock they had put on the sluice gates, more water would be released to run the hydroelectric dam on a river in the valley below. They blamed the electric company for draining the lake to levels that they said threatened their crops and survival in 2008, prompting the roadblock and the 18-month standoff.

At the community meeting Feb. 6, government officials announced the first step toward a solution. The energy company had relinquished property rights to the lake and the surrounding area, and the government had issued a decree declaring the lake part of Huascarán National Park and property of all Peruvians.

Over the next two hours, Antonio Duenas Goni, who is both president of the community and a catechist, guided debate over a case that has become emblematic of the battle over water rights in this Andean country. In the end, the community and government officials agreed to a plan that would give the farmers more of a say in how much water is released from the lake for agriculture, drinking water and the hydroelectric dam.

"This is a historic moment," Duenas told the assembly as he signed the minutes of the meeting, in which the head of the governmental National Water Authority agreed to set up a watershed management committee that would include Cruz de Mayo and train community members to monitor lake discharges to ensure that water is not misused.

The community's battle may not be over, however. Duke Energy Egenor, the Peruvian subsidiary of North Carolina-based Duke Energy, which operates the hydroelectric plant, gave up property rights it had obtained in the early 1990s, which probably should not have been granted in the first place, because the land is in a national park.

But the company retains its license to use 5 cubic meters of water per second for the hydroelectric plant. That touched off the conflict in 2008, when the company tapped Lake Paron and farmers said the company left them without enough water for crops. Eight farmers still face criminal charges because of the blockade of the lake.

Guillermo Fajardo, public affairs manager for Duke in Lima, said the company's water license was not affected by the turnover of the lake property to the government. But Eddie Rosazza Asin, adviser to the head of the National Water Authority, said the company will not be able to unilaterally tap Lake Paron and will have to negotiate any water use with other users.

Recent years have seen growing conflicts between communities and industry in Peru. The government ombudsman's office has registered scores of environmental conflicts, many of them over water.

"Water is a common resource. It cannot be treated simply as a commodity, for the privileged use of a company or some other interest," said Archbishop Pedro Barreto Jimeno of Huancayo, president of the Peruvian bishops' social action commission, which has been advising the community during the dispute. "These communities depend on water for life. When there is a threat to their water supply, or its purity, these reactions are not surprising."

The conflict over Lake Paron reflects the delicate interplay between climate and livelihood in the Andes Mountains.

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