

Juniper Davis
Western Environmental Law Center
Taos, New Mexico

The PILP stipend allowed me the opportunity to work with an amazing organization this summer – the Western Environmental Law Center (WELC). WELC is a public interest law firm that represents activists, Indian tribes, local governments and citizen groups in a wide array of cases aimed at protecting western landscapes and communities. I worked in WELC's Taos office, but they also have offices in Eugene and Boise.

My projects focused primarily in two areas: fighting coal bed methane development in wilderness quality lands of the Red Desert in Wyoming and protecting the traditional water rights of acequias in a rural, poor, and predominately Hispanic New Mexico watershed. However, I also worked peripherally on projects to combat the flood of Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs) into New Mexico and to write county land use regulations to protect communities against oil and gas development.

I found all of my work extremely rewarding. My supervising attorneys included me in all aspects of their ongoing litigation, as well as bringing me in for interesting meetings outside of my project areas. But more importantly, I felt that in my short time at WELC I was able to advance their efforts to protect the western community.

My work with the acequias was particularly gratifying. Acequias are communally run irrigation ditches which often have water rights dating back before the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. Acequias in Mora County where we worked are made up of individuals and families who have ranched and farmed in the Mora Valley for generations and who have very few resources for protecting their water rights. The Mora County acequias are increasingly feeling pressure from newcomers to the area who illegally impound water and threaten the acequia's fragile structure and the community's traditional way of life. As the relationship between WELC and the acequias was just beginning, my research was able to significantly influence the direction of the program. The community itself was overwhelming thankful for our assistance. At the end of a long day of work, I was able to go home feeling energized and excited about this work.

As an added bonus, I was able to live in a beautiful area of the country and I met a wide array of interesting and intriguing people. I spent many evenings on long walks along the mesa where I lived in a small adobe house, looking out over the Sangre de Cristo mountain range. On more than one occasion on these walks after the afternoon rains had cleared, I was presented with full-sky double rainbows, the smell of wet sage, and a reassuring sense of being on the right path. I could not have done any of this without the PILP stipend, and I am very grateful that I was given the opportunity.