

Jason Obergfell WEFTA Field Report – Bolivia project visit from 4/7/26 to 5/3/26

During my recent visit to Bolivia, a familiar phrase came to mind from my childhood. It came to me as we traversed rutted out dirt roads on our way to far flung rural communities in the Bolivian altiplano. It came back again as we tried to distinguish where the “road” might be as we drove through partially vegetated high plains (that were equally bumpy, I might add). The phrase rattling around in my head was from the original Star Trek series, which began each episode by ironically stating “To boldly go where no man [later, no one] has gone before.”



As was the case with Star Trek, obviously someone had gone there before. We were visiting communities of people who had lived for generations at the end of the bumpy, sometimes indistinguishable, roads. At the same time, the phrase also conveys the general truth that “not too many” had chosen to go there before. That is why these rural communities were still in need of water projects in the year 2026. It is why WEFTA exists and why I had traveled to Bolivia. Along with our Bolivian partner organization, Suma Jayma, we were boldly choosing “the road[s] less traveled” in order to serve the water needs in typically ignored communities.

I arrived to Cochabamba, Bolivia on April 7, 2026. It had been a year since my last visit to Bolivia, and I spent a week coordinating with Suma Jayma, visiting Bolivian friends, and generally recuperating my energy from the 24-hour plus travel it takes to get from nearly any city in the United States to nearly any city in Bolivia. I flew to El Alto, Bolivia in the Department of La Paz on April 13th, in order to meet with Suma Jayma in-person and begin traveling to rural communities early in the morning on April 14th. I stayed in the house of Jaime Rosas, the engineer for Suma Jayma, during my visit. The project visits for the week were as follows:

April 14, 2026

We first visited the community of Kella Kella in the Municipality of Comanche, accompanied by the local leader Janet Jujra. There are 27 families identified in this community for potential/likely participation in the upcoming water project (wells with hand pumps), funded by a generous Bolivian woman who had lived in the United States for much of her life. We visited 7 different families to see their existing water source and/or living situation.



The second community we visited, Marka Jutani, was in the Municipality of Coro Coro. There have been 33 families identified for potential/likely participation in the upcoming water project. We met in the community and also visited the homes of 3 different families who will likely participate in the upcoming water project.

The community of Contorno Bajo, located in the Municipality of Caquiaviri, will also be part of the same water project. Due to time constraints, as well as limited access related to road conditions after the rainy season, this community was not visited during my trip. There are 30 families that have been identified for potential/likely participation in the 2026 water project.

We returned to the house of Jaime Rosas and discussed various aspects of the Suma Jayma project work. There will be 90 families receiving wells with hand pumps for the 2026 water project funded by the generous Bolivian benefactor. A water system design will also be part of the overall project, and the approximate cost of the design will be \$9,000. The total project amount of funds used for the project during 2026 will be \$85,000. Suma Jayma will finalize and submit the project proposal for this work in early May.

It is noteworthy to mention that this water project is being funded by a Bolivian woman, implemented by the Bolivian not-for-profit Suma Jayma, and will serve Bolivian people. Although I am not Bolivian, I am thankful to be able to say that I lived 18 years in Bolivia and continue to collaborate with Suma Jayma since returning to the United States two years ago. I am also thankful to have known the generous Bolivian donor for nearly 15 years.

April 15, 2026

We visited communities in Marka Achiri, which was approximately a 3-hour drive each way. This area is known for its primary source of income being llamas and alpacas. The area has enough crops to sustain the residents of these

communities, but in general the land is not able to produce abundantly. The residents in these areas currently use water from improvised hand-dug wells and open ponds where animals also drink. The general landscape could be described as a high plains desert during much of the year due to the lack of rain for extended periods of time.

Suma Jayma is planning to submit the water project for the communities in Marka Achiri as the scope of work for a grant request this year. I discussed my understanding of the availability of funds through this annual grant. Typically, the funds for this grant have been shared between Suma Jayma and WEFTA's other in-country partner, CONSES. During our 3-hour trip to Marka Achiri, I explained to Jaime Rosas that I currently anticipate that CONSES will not be requesting funds from the annual grant program for 2026. Jaime indicated that Suma Jayma's 2026 project scope will include only wells with hand pumps. It was anticipated that each well with hand pump will require \$845 of funding, which means that the "base" project will serve 71 families. Up to 107 families could be served by the funding, if CONSES indeed does not participate in this year's grant request.

The first community we visited on April 15th was Ayllu Lara. We met with a group of community members and local authorities to discuss the project, and several questions were asked by the community members. Some of the questions were quite practical, such as addressing the relative lack of rock and sand in the area (for fabricating concrete well-liner rings). The local leader addressed the issues and indicated that the community is able to meet the project requirements, primarily through collaboration and cooperation within the community. We visited the homes of two families in this community to see their existing water sources and hear about their experiences.

The second community we visited was Janko Marka. We met with the community just outside of their school property, and we discussed the aspects of the project. We visited two families in this community.



The third community we visited was in Zona Mikani. The area was known as Acerro Asiruni, which according to the residents means "hill with lots of snakes." We met with members of the community at the location of one family's current water source, which could be described as a small spring in the side of a hill. This spring provided roughly the water needed for just one family, and it was owned by the Huiza family.



The fourth community we visited was in the Zona Huancarama. We met with members of the community at an existing water source, which was a pond where the alpacas and the humans both obtain water. While we met, several different alpacas were walking in the pond while they drank. A well with a hand pump would be installed near the pond in order to filter the water through the soil and/or tap into the groundwater, which would significantly improve the water quality and the water protection for human use. Each participating family would have its own well with hand pump.



April 16, 2026

The site visit on April 16th was for the inauguration of the water project completed using the grant from a religious congregation that was awarded in late 2025. There were 87 families served by the grant from the Catholic congregation of religious sisters, and there were 2 additional families served by a micro-grant provided by a related organization of Catholic laity (a separate entity). We were accompanied during our visit by the Alcaldesa (Mayor) Luciana Condori. The project was completed in the communities of Capiri and Copajira. Since this project visit was an inauguration of a completed project, we were greeted by a large quantity of community members and local leaders. We visited the new wells for 3 different families in these communities, and there were many expressions of gratitude for the work that had been completed. There were also requests for additional projects in the future, which were received but without any new commitments being made. This is necessary, because WEFTA needs to seek additional funding for each project it undertakes. Any indication of a positive response can be interpreted as a firm commitment within a Bolivian community, which can be problematic for our in-country partners if funding is not able to be obtained.



April 17, 2026

On April 17th, we visited the Centro Infantil 16 de noviembre, where an expansion project was undertaken that nearly doubled the capacity of the existing children's center. This center serves families with limited economic resources by providing a place where children that are too young for school can be cared for and taught while their parents are working. It could be described as a "day care program" in US terminology, but it might be more aptly described as resembling the "Head Start" programs offered in the United States. The children benefit from educational and formative activities at the center. This project was funded through designated donations made to WEFTA, and Suma Jayma served as the project manager for the construction work.

This project was recently completed, and the new spaces were officially inaugurated and blessed during our visit. This project is located in Senkata, which could be generally described as part of the large urban city known as "El Alto." The

project was primarily funded by a donation from the same Bolivian woman who lived in the United States for a large portion of her life. She is now in her 90s and has returned Bolivia to live out her remaining years. I was able to meet with her while I was in Bolivia, and we were able to get her niece and her niece's husband to be come and participate in the project inauguration.

Miriam's niece spoke during the celebratory ceremony. I also spoke during the ceremony and highlighted how Miriam's life was one to admire and strive towards. Several parents of children who participate at the Centro Infantil also spoke about how thankful they were for the services provided. The construction was very well done, and two of the three new rooms were already being used. The third room was simply waiting for the furniture and other items needed to make the space ready for children.



I flew back to Cochabamba on April 17th, but I continued to coordinate with Suma Jayma during the remainder of my time in Bolivia. It should be noted that the Director of Suma Jayma, Braulio Rojas, was in the hospital during my visit. He subsequently had some medical procedures and treatments that have been successful, and he is recuperating well. Suma Jayma is a small but highly effective Bolivian not-for-profit, and that quality and effectiveness was evident during my trip. Suma Jayma consistently overcomes the unexpected situations that can arise in Bolivia during a project's timeframe. For example, diesel fuel and gasoline were in short supply during the 12 months since I last visited.

Discussion about Insurance for new Suma Jayma pickup truck

One item that was discussed with Jaime Rosas during my trip was the hope that Suma Jayma would obtain insurance for its new pickup truck. Although most Bolivians do not obtain insurance beyond the required minimum (known as SOAT), it would be very helpful for Suma Jayma to have insurance on a vehicle that is so integral to its work. I explained how the cost of the insurance could be incorporated into the cost of the work that is being done each year. With some simple calculations, I estimated that the cost could be equivalent to roughly \$7 more for each well that is constructed during a given calendar year (assuming the typical workload of recent years). Jaime indicated that Suma Jayma will submit to WEFTA a summary of the price quotes obtained for insuring their new pickup truck. I indicated that there might be the possibility of assisting with the cost of the insurance for the remainder of 2026, since the per-well costs have already been established for this year. The price increase for insurance could be incorporated into the new price calculated for the 2027 calendar year.

April 23rd Meeting with the Bolivian benefactor

Upon my return to Cochabamba, I also printed out several photographs from my project visits and coordinated with the Bolivian benefactor to meet at her apartment. We were able to meet in-person on April 23rd, and I gifted her with photographs from my visit as well as a hand-knit scarf that someone in one of the communities had given me as a thank-you gift for the work that had been done. I explained to her how successful each project had been, and I also was able to explain how significant the need is for the projects that will be done during 2026. She seemed quite pleased with the work, and she was also thankful that her niece was able to attend the inauguration of the Centro Infantil. She had received very positive reports from her niece via a phone call.

Concluding Remarks

I began my return journey to the United States on May 3rd. I technically arrived to the United States on May 5th (just after midnight). In retrospect, my journey was also a part of “The Road Less Travelled.” In my case, the “road” was an invisible airspace that led to and from Bolivia. Yet many things that are invisible are what produce the very visible changes in our world. In the past, I worked with a religious congregation that had a motto that guided their work, “Making God’s Love Visible.” The same could be said of Suma Jayma and WEFTA. It is the “invisible” commitment to choose “The Road Less Traveled,” continue on the journey in spite of the bumps and uncertainties, and “boldly go where [mostly] no one has gone before” that characterize the transformative work of Suma Jayma and WEFTA. I’m thankful to be a part of such a journey.

As evidenced in my final photo of this report, the Bolivian people served are also thankful to have their prayers answered by the work that everyone in the WEFTA community makes possible through their collaboration and cooperation.

