

River Report

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From Growing Crops to Growing Cities: A Look at the Changing Use of the Colorado River

By S. Joshua Newcom

Through establishment of the 1902 Reclamation Act, thousands of settlers were enticed to head West and sow the region's arid lands using water generated primarily by U.S. Bureau of Reclamation (Bureau) projects. Today, those federal projects supply over 20 percent of all surface water irrigation in the United States – 80 percent of which is in the southwestern U.S. including the Colorado River Basin. There is little debate about the productivity of these fertile farms, some of the most fecund in the world, that contribute an estimated 15 percent of the nation's total crops and livestock and create millions of dollars in revenues annually.

But despite agriculture's early (and continued) prominence in the West, it wasn't long before the urban side of the development equation began its quest for water as well.

"No one envisaged the present enormous urban demand and accelerating use of water that we're experiencing today and will continue to witness into the future," said Norris Hundley, historian and author of *The Great Thirst* and *Water and the West*. "As late as the movement for what became the Boulder Canyon Act [funding what is now Hoover Dam], urban interest was in hydroelectricity rather than water," he said.

"That all changed when William Mulholland went to Washington, D.C. in 1924 and told Congress: 'I am here in the interest of domestic water supply for the city of Los Angeles.'"

Since Mulholland made his initial pitch to Congress for an urban water supply, cities throughout the West have continued to grow at exceptional rates. Compared with the rest of the U.S., Western states are growing at nearly double the national average: 31 percent versus 19 percent. But with finite water supplies available for development, where have these "urban archipelagos" turned to quench their thirsts? Increasingly, agriculture has been the avenue of acquiring additional water supplies to feed sprawling cities.

"Given the changing contemporary needs and the obligation that the Bureau has to honor contracts, we've got to determine ways of meshing those different perspectives," said Robert Johnson, regional director for the Lower Colorado Region of the Bureau. "Water transfers are the key on how that can happen. They are absolutely critical and our job is to try and facilitate them, not require them, but to try and facilitate willing buyer/willing seller types of transfers."

Johnson said with the possibility of new projects on the Lower Colorado River highly unlikely, he estimates about 20 percent of the current lower river agricultural allocation (about 5 million acre-feet annually) will be reallocated towards urban use in the next century.

If this is the case, what will these transfers look like?

“It’s important to distinguish between two types of ag-to-urban water transfers,” said Douglas Kenney, a researcher at the Natural Resources Law Center, University of Colorado School of Law who recently co-authored *Water and Growth in Colorado: A Review of Legal and Policy Issues*. Kenney illustrated one type as occurring when cities “grow into” farmland and use both the land and water for growth. The second type, Kenney said, is where a city acquires water from a farmer and transfers it hundreds of miles away.

“With the second variety of transfer, you end up with these rural areas that used to have a sustaining agricultural economy and now the agriculture has moved out and you have nothing to replace the agriculture except bankrupt rural communities,” he said.

Though the economic value of agriculture is undeniable, municipal and industrial water use is taking the front seat as the economic powerhouse in many regions of the West. The requirement has been a shift in water distribution from a region that was once predominantly agriculturally based to one that now holds that fastest growing segment of the U.S. population. This issue of *River Report* will examine some of the ag-to-urban water transfers occurring around the Colorado River Basin using case examples in Colorado, Arizona and California and the impact, for better or for worse, they are having on farms, rural communities and the environment.