

LIVING RIVERSSM

CURRENTS

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ALFALFA BLUES In the Upper Basin

Peter Lawson stands next to Professor Creek, which drains into the Colorado River 20 miles upstream of Moab, Utah. For eight months each year he diverts Professor Creek's water for hay cultivation, one of the thousands of marginal alfalfa fields that dominate irrigated agriculture in the upper Colorado watershed. He offered to share his frustrations with how state and federal programs discourage efficient agricultural water use, and make it impossible for farmers to use their water rights to benefit the environment.

When Lawson purchased his farm in 1991, every drop of the Professor Creek's water was poured on to the fields. "I went ahead and installed some fairly sophisticated sprinklers which were much more efficient in delivering water to the alfalfa," he says. "Not only was water being left in the creek, but I was able to increase my acreage under cultivation."

Despite these gains, the state of Utah forced him to buy more water rights because he was farming more land. It made no difference that he was actually using less water than before. "One can't support a family with this business as it is, then when you try to increase efficiency, such that everyone wins, they force you to spend more money."



Peter Lawson at his irrigation source

and supplies, there's very little left for anything else. This is why many farmers in the upper basin must have another source of income to make ends meet.

"I hate subsidies, but I've applied for them from the US Department of Agriculture on two occasions. It's impossible to keep up with the flood of forms, so I've never received any money," Lawson says. "Whether you have 50 acres, or 50,000, the paperwork is the same, thus it's the large growers with their attorneys that get all the hand outs, making it that much more difficult for the family farms to compete."

Lawson believes that it's vital that all farmers are provided mechanisms so that more water can be left in the rivers for habitat preservation and restoration. "Now there's nothing but disincentives, he says." Any water that he does not use can just be taken by someone else downstream, and were he to stop irrigating altogether, his water rights would be taken away and sold to somebody else.

"Despite this, I'm still trying to figure out how I might be able to use less water," he says. He's considered shifting to orchards with drip irrigation, but the state would require him to reduce the area irrigated, or purchase even more water rights. "These laws are crazy," Lawson concludes. "It would be so easy to for us to heal our rivers, and still feed ourselves, if only the politicians would focus on addressing the problems, not preserving the corporate welfare for the larger growers."



Each December the power brokers in Colorado River politics gather in Las Vegas under the banner of the Colorado River Water Users Association. LIVING RIVERS *Currents* is taking this opportunity to publicize the leading user of Colorado River water, alfalfa fields for cattle feed, and how this impedes Colorado River restoration.

**COW Colorado River
Water Users Association**

December 12-14, 2001 • Caesars Palace, Las Vegas

Lawson points out that he can only get between \$80 and \$100 per ton for his alfalfa. With four cuttings per year, and about one ton per acre from each cutting, that's less than \$40,000 annually from the farm. When deductions are made for land purchase, equipment

INDUSTRIAL HAY Draining the Lower Colorado

by Christine Henges-Jeck

Each year, almost half the Colorado's annual flow, some six million acre feet, arrive at Imperial Dam just 150 miles from the river's mouth in the Gulf of California. In non-flood years, the water diverted from Imperial onward irrigates 1.2 million acres in southwestern Arizona, southeastern California, and the Mexican states of Baja California and Sonora. Despite increasing demand for water throughout the Colorado River low-value, water-intensive crops, especially alfalfa, consume a disproportionate amount of the region's water. Alfalfa is the region's most water intensive crop, second largest crop by area, and of extremely low value.

The region's farmers irrigate over 230,000 acres of alfalfa annually. Nearly three-quarters of the crop grows in California's Imperial Valley. The remaining twenty-five percent of the region's alfalfa crop grows across the border in the Mexicali Valley and, to a lesser extent, in Arizona's Yuma area. Farmers grow alfalfa because it requires less labor than other crops, can be harvested multiple times during the region's long growing season, and tolerates the poorly drained clay soils of the Imperial and Mexicali valleys.

Alfalfa consumes more water than any other crop below Imperial Dam. Farmers apply as much as seven vertical feet of water to alfalfa crops, to promote growth under the hot desert sun. Although it comprises less than twenty percent of the region's irrigated acreage, alfalfa uses over forty percent of the water used by the region's crops. Per acre, alfalfa consumes sixty percent more water than wheat, the region's largest crop, forty percent more water than cotton, the third largest crop by acreage, and seventy-five percent more water than lettuce, the fourth largest crop. The region's alfalfa crop uses more water than all these crops combined.

Although alfalfa consumes an enormous quantity of water, its value per acre is relatively low. According to Imperial County, the Imperial Valley's alfalfa crop value was \$687 per acre in 1999. This stands in stark comparison to lettuces which generated \$3,895 to \$5,021 per acre. Even cotton, another low value crop generated higher values at \$959 per acre in the same year.

Alfalfa is a feed crop, especially for dairy operations in the Imperial Valley and California's Central Valley, among other locations. The plentiful, senior water rights enjoyed by farmers in the region permit the cultivation of this water-intensive crop. If price signals were different, it is quite likely that farmers would maximize their returns by turning to other, higher-value crops. Until such changes occur, millions of acre-feet will be diverted from the Colorado River to support these low-value feed crops.



The Colorado River transformed into cattle feed

Christine Henges-Jeck is a Research Associate with Pacific Institute. For more information on water use in the Lower Colorado region, see the Pacific Institute's new report, *Missing Water: The Uses and Flows of Water in the Colorado River Delta Region*, available on-line at www.pacinst.org.

HAY BURN

Alfalfa Subsidies and Public Health

By Gordon LaBedz, M.D.

More people die of heart disease and strokes than all other illnesses combined. The cause? The red-meat-oriented American diet, high in fat, with beef and dairy as the prime culprit. And you and I pay for it through government subsidies.

While many ranchers get their share of corporate welfare, the less-visible cattle feed industry is also cashing in: Corn is the main crop for fattening cattle in the Midwest, but here in the West, it's alfalfa.

Taxpayers unwittingly fund a system that perpetuates unhealthy diets for millions of Americans, bringing on early death or illness for tens of thousands every year.

A recent US Public Health Service report concluded that 1.29 million, or 54% of all U.S. deaths can be attributed to the substantial risk factors associated with the consumption of meat products. The Economic Research Center reports \$80 billion dollars in annual medical costs and lost productivity from over-consumption of fatty foods. Cows are killing us!

According to government and independent figures, we could save on average 75% of the water used to irrigate alfalfa by planting vegetables. If we subsidize crops, why not at least grow nutritious food? We could save money and river ecosystems, but most importantly, we would help people live healthier and longer lives.

As a physician I see more than my share of patients who are being killed by the beef—and alfalfa—industries. As a taxpayer I am outraged that my dollars are being used to keep these destructive industries in business.

Gordon LaBedz, M.D., is a physician in the Greater Los Angeles area and is Chair of the Sierra Club Angeles Chapter.

ANIMAS RIVER RALLY

Durango Turns out to Stop A-LP

On a warm, sunny day 150 river activists gathered at noon in Durango, Colorado on November 9th alongside the endangered Animas River. Confidently the protestors marched downtown carrying colorful signs and banners while chanting slogans demanding the Animas remain wild and free.

The jubilant crowd, representing 35 groups, then gathered before the offices of the Bureau of Reclamation, calling for termination of the Animas-La Plata Project. Speakers included leaders of social justice, taxpayer and environmental groups from each of the Four Corners states. Citing violations of federal laws, the groups de-



Taking to the streets to save the Animas River

manded an investigation of the project by the General Accounting Office (GAO). The urgent nature of the group's complaints were heightened by the imminent excavation of ancient Native American gravesites that would occur in advance of construction. Prior to the rally, members of the Southern Ute and Navajo nations gathered at the proposed reservoir site and offered prayers for the preservation of these sacred grounds.

These concerns were listed in letters addressed to every member of Congress and deposited in the mailbox before the BuRec office. "We want accountability, not more corporate subsidies," exclaimed Owen Lammers, executive director of LIVING RIVERS. "The real estate developers want to declare victory in this struggle, but we're here to tell them they're going to lose." The rally also signified the first public event in LIVING RIVERS' campaign to reform of the Bureau of Reclamation in its centennial year, 2002.

The march continued back to the shores of the Animas River where refreshments were presented and local musicians entertained till sunset.

Trading Alfalfa for Delta Restoration

Scientists estimate that the currently desiccated Colorado River delta could begin regeneration with just one percent of the river's flow. To reach the one percent conservation goal for the Colorado River alfalfa growers could:

- Shift 43,000 acres of alfalfa from sprinkler to drip irrigation.
- Shift 38,500 acres of alfalfa to higher value, less water-intensive citrus and vegetable crops; or
- Fallow 17,200 acres of alfalfa.

As Mark Lewis said in his Veteran's Day column in the *Farmington Daily Times*, regarding the One Percent Campaign, "Are we willing to sacrifice a little so something for the overall good is accomplished? We would be giving something of ourselves for the betterment of everyone. I wonder if we are up to it."

GOING, GOING, GONE?

Grand Canyon Native Fish

New data from ongoing research in Grand Canyon National Park suggest a serious decline in humpback chub numbers in the Colorado River through Grand Canyon. This is one of the last wild populations of humpback in the world. The canyon's three other endangered species, Colorado pikeminnow, bonytail, and razor-back sucker have long been extinct in the canyon.



Endangered humpback chub

Endangered fish throughout the Colorado River now have even more to fear. A new recovery plan issued in September by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) would make survival of these fish species largely dependent upon hatcheries, while river habitat restoration needs go unaddressed.

Fish recovery would not be based on viable wild populations that can reproduce in native habitat, but on hatchery fish being continuously dumped to maintain a given population size. "This is completely artificial," says John Weisheit, LIVING RIVERS Conservation Director. "If the river can't sustain the fish on its own, then there is no recovery."

Bowing to pressure from water and power interests, the USFWS continues to ignore the major problems driving these unique fishes to extinction: (1) dams that block migration paths and degrade habitat conditions; (2) water waste by irrigators and other users, dangerously depleting streamflows; and (3) introduced fish species that prey on and compete with natives.

Final recovery goals are expected in early 2002. LIVING RIVERS and others have submitted comments, calling for a basinwide recovery plan that emphasizes dam decommissioning, habitat restoration, water conservation, and non-native fish removal. You can too! Write Dr. Robert Muth, Director, Upper Colorado River Endangered Fish Recovery Program, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, P.O. Box 25486, Denver, CO 80225; robert_muth@fws.gov.

RALLY FOR GRAND CANYON RESTORATION

Friday, January 18, 2002 at 11:30 am
Arizona Center II
5th St and Van Buren • Downtown Phoenix

Join LIVING RIVERS and others as we send a message to federal and state agencies, and water and power interests that will be gathering in Phoenix, January 17-18, 2002. This group has been convening for the past five years, charged with developing strategies to heal the Colorado River through Grand Canyon. The ecosystem does not lie, this group is failing. It's critical that the public let them know that the time for action is NOW! Stop Killing the Grand Canyon!

LIVING RIVERS *Currents* is published monthly by LIVING RIVERS. For information on our full range of river advocacy programs, or becoming a member, please give us a call or visit our website.

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