

Addressing Water for Agriculture in the Colorado River Basin

Moving Forward on Agricultural Water Conservation



Colorado State University Awarded USDA Grant to Work on Agricultural Water Conservation

Eyes are focused on agriculture when it comes to finding water to reduce growing pressure on water resources in the Colorado River Basin. That's because agriculture diverts the majority of available water. And although agriculture reuses the same water multiple times, and the water they use is largely for the benefit of those of us who eat the food they produce, policy-makers believe even small changes in agricultural water management can reap benefits for other users, like growing cities and the environment, with positive benefits for agriculture as well. The U.S. Department of the Interior has called for an initiative for Colorado River Basin agriculture to conserve as much as one million acre feet of water. But conserving even a fraction of that amount **will require unprecedented changes in how water is used in agriculture—changes that have to do not just with current irrigation practices, but more importantly with political, social, economic, environmental, and administrative factors at multiple levels.** The incentives and disincentives to agricultural water conservation form a challenging puzzle.

Agricultural water users must be actively engaged in this challenge. They are the ones with the most to lose, and they have potentially much to gain from improvements in diversion and irrigation systems—such as keeping more acres in production over the long term in addition to reduced maintenance costs, labor savings, and higher yields. The Colorado Water Institute at CSU is embarking on a three-year initiative funded by the USDA in which engineers and social scientists will **learn from agricultural producers what conservation methods are likely to work in their area and what changes to the many surrounding factors may be needed for agricultural water conservation to be fully effective in practice.**

- We will work with agricultural producers and irrigation companies already implementing water conservation to **demonstrate the technologies and practices that result in changes in water use**, because agricultural producers know what water management changes and improvements work best on their farms and ranches.
- We will work with irrigators, their water providers, water attorneys, policy-makers and other experts to **catalogue the existing legal, economic, and social obstacles** to agricultural water conservation. We will drill down into each obstacle to understand what actions would be required to overcome it. Out of this will come a **user-driven matrix and process that can support decisions for focused actions needed for the very diverse contexts in which agricultural water is managed.**
- We will **support agricultural leaders throughout the Colorado River Basin to promote the changes required** to better manage agricultural water without reducing productivity that maintains a secure food supply and strong communities. Other users and society as a whole will need to join agriculture in stepping up to the water conservation challenge.

More information is available from Colorado Water Institute, MaryLou.Smith@colostate.edu. Also www.crbagwater.colostate.edu