



Addressing Water for Agriculture in the Colorado River
Basin: a Preliminary Report on Interviews
with Farmers, Ranchers and Water Managers

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Objectives:

1. to learn about farmer, rancher, water manager perspectives on current and future status of agricultural water in the CRB
2. To identify ways in which land-grant universities can better support agricultural water users

Land-grant partners: Colorado State University, University of Arizona, University of California, University of Nevada, New Mexico State University, Utah State University, University of Wyoming

A USDA-supported Research Planning Project

Research activities

In-depth, semi-structured telephone interviews

Focused online survey

Mapping and geospatial data base development

Vast diversity of agricultural water users

Geographical and climatic

Productive activities

1922 Colorado River Compact,
the Law of the River

Range of organizational contexts

Common challenges

Uncertain water supplies

Storage issues

Conjunctive management of surface and groundwater

Regulatory pressures

Uncertain farm generational transitions

Growing demands on agricultural water

Growing demands on agricultural water

Municipal and industrial transfers

Permanent “buy and dry” trends

Temporary leasing, fallowing, formal/
informal water banking, collaborative
conservation

Suburban development

Water market prices

“As growth comes agriculture seems to be the water that is available. There is pressure on agriculture in general because of the value of water. ...If water prices are going for \$3,000 an acre foot, when the older farmer is ready to hang up his irrigation boots, the kids go, “those water rights are X million dollars.”

Utah water manager

Indirect impacts of transfers

“We’re seeing more urban type interaction in Montezuma and Dolores counties... So many smaller farmers, they’re going, “we’re Montezuma ag.” But you and your ten acres are not really Montezuma agriculture. You don’t pay huge property taxes, pay production inputs. You don’t go buy \$ 5,000 of corn feed, \$10,000 of alfalfa feed, center pivots, tractors, fuel, those things that keep our community going.”

Colorado rancher

Benefits of development

“With our type of farming, the common view is that development pressure is a good thing for farming. If your values and assets are going up, that helps strengthen your business and gives you more options... I've always been in favor of development.”

Grower in Coachella Valley, CA

Environment and environmentalists

ESA, instream flows and uncertainty

“They'll even have the opportunity and responsibility to even go so far as to establish a low flow level in the river. If that is reached, irrigation gets shut down and the minnows have the priority.... If you are depending on water from the river as we are in our operation... you're faced with a tremendous uncertainty about whether you're going to have it.”

New Mexico Rancher

Different visions of river management

“There is an element in this area that is bound and be damned that the river will continue to be free-flowing, wild and meandering. Nearly none of them live along the river...When we have floods, and it destroys part of our farming operations with bank erosion, it's no big deal to them. It's a very big deal to us.”

Utah water manager

Agricultural producers as environmentalists

“Ag people consider themselves environmentalists. We have to be. If we ruin our environment, we have nothing.”

County leader and rancher,
Colorado

Collaboration with other water user sectors

“We were really facing a shortage one year. So we worked with the other users and everybody took a percentage of days that they would not divert water. We ended up not facing a shortage, but we did divert a week later to help offset the shortage for other users.”

New Mexico water leader

Drawbacks of collaboration

“After having spent the time I've spent with the stakeholder groups: federal, state, municipal, or environmental, farmers, ranchers, educators, the whole smear, I have a real concern about the fact that we were charged with reaching a consensus. It didn't seem like that was going to happen. I don't think it's going to happen in the future.”

New Mexico water leader

Successful experiences with collaboration

Key visionary leaders

Focus on common interests

Willingness to compromise

Generating concrete successes quickly

Perspectives on ag water's future

Agricultural water users aren't affected the same way by their common challenges

"Producers of specialty crops in California have a bright future because of the need to feed the world. California can do it better than anybody else. Crop production in California is incredible."

Coachella Valley, CA grower

"Some of the bigger growers.... have children in their 20s and 30s who are actively involved in the farm. They are transitioning well to the future."

Coachella Valley, CA grower

Perspectives on ag water's future

"Water runs uphill to money, that's the way things have gone....We can't afford to keep farming.... With the price of land, you can't buy a farm and make it produce any money."

Utah irrigation leader

"More farms will be abandoned. Kids don't want to farm...."

New Mexico rancher

Perspectives on what is needed

Greater public understanding of irrigated agriculture's role in

food security

creating & maintaining environmental and amenity values

"This is an oasis in the high desert. But God didn't make the oasis. It's man-made. It takes lots of water, diverted regularly in almost impossible quantities to keep it that way."

Wyoming rancher

The university role

Irrigation technology efficiency

Improved, hybrid seeds

Better soil management practices

Education

Social science research?

Conclusion

“We have an obligation to our kids, to our grandkids, to those who come after us, to ensure that that water is available. The greatest compliment we might get twenty, thirty, forty years down the road, will be the “thank goodness that those folks were wise enough and ensured that this water was available for us to use today.”

New Mexico water leader

