“Cooperation, Conflict and Change: Agricultural Water Perspectives and Responses to Pressures on Agricultural Water Governance on the Colorado River”

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Abstract

With a significantly over-allocated river and a future of expected population increases and climate change, pressures grow on agriculture's share of water in the Colorado River Basin. This USDA-supported study explored agricultural water users and managers’ views and responses to an increasingly complex reality of uncertain supply and growing demand for agricultural water by municipal, industry, environment and recreation users. In 61 semi-structured telephone interviews, farmers, ranchers and water managers identified the most significant threats to their water including uncertain supply, storage needs, return flow and groundwater issues, regulatory burdens, uncertain transitions to new generations of farmers and growing demand from non-agricultural water users. Agricultural water users’ experience of these pressures and their responses to them vary significantly across the Basin by geographic location, production conditions and cropping type, proximity to expanding urban areas, and other factors. Nevertheless, interviewees reported three general types of organized, often interrelated responses to pressures on their water. Technical responses aim to modernize water delivery, monitoring and other management systems in pursuit of greater efficiency and conservation. Market-based responses pursue a range of voluntary water transfer mechanisms from temporary leasing to sale of water rights, water banking, fallowing and cooperative conservation initiatives. Political responses include formal and informal negotiation of new governance arrangements, including legal challenges and settlements, shortage and water sharing mechanisms, and multi-stakeholder conflict resolution and planning. This presentation will discuss illustrative cases of diverse agricultural water users’ response strategies, focusing on interviewees’ accounts of their key successes and challenges and how they see the future of agricultural water in their part of the Colorado River Basin. The presentation will conclude with a discussion of what role land-grant universities may play in helping protect the place of agriculture and rural community in the future of water in the American West.