

Pima-Maricopa Irrigation Project

Education Initiative

2002-2003



Restoring water to ensure the continuity of the Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh tradition of agriculture

A Joint-Use Irrigation Project?

Part 28

Despite the Sacaton, Little Gila, Agency, Blackwater, Casa Blanca and Sacaton Flats projects, agricultural production on the Pima Reservation remained unstable and chaotic without a permanent supply of water. While there were 18,500 acres of land under canal, in 1919, just 7,693 acres was actually irrigated and farmed. Water remained insufficient and episodic floodwaters continued to damage or destroy the brush dams used to divert available floodwaters onto reservation lands.

The Pima and Maricopa were increasingly frustrated by the lack of water resources. Unable to restore water on their own accord, the Indians were forced to rely on the US Government for redress of their grievances. The government’s lack of action in restoring their use of the water was frustrating and affecting the next generation of Pima-Maricopa farmers. “Following a year of plenty of water,” Wendell M. Reed, Superintendent of Irrigation for the Indian Service, alerted Congress, “the Indians take heart ... and cultivate a large part of the land.” But when water was in short supply, Pima and Maricopa farmers became discouraged and “the next year they will not farm so much.” Lack of water was not only encouraging many Indians to abandon their agrarian heritage—and this at a time when it was an official federal policy to promote agriculture among the Indians—and find work in other venues, but it also tested the Pima’s faith in the ability and commitment of the government to restore their water. If the Pima were to continue their agrarian way of life, water had to be restored quickly.

In February of 1912, after nearly thirty years of official federal neglect, Texas Congressman John H. Stephens introduced a bill into Congress authorizing federal action on Pima water rights. Stephens was moved by the Pima “Appeal for Justice,” written by Antonito Azul in July of 1911. Encouraged by Azul, the Presbyterian Church and the Indian Rights Association, Stephens’ bill called for the construction of the San Carlos project and the authorization to adjudicate Pima water rights. Assigned to the Committee on Indian Affairs, the bill was supported by many members of Congress who were aware of the industry and historic friendliness of the Pima, as well as their long-standing complaints. Scores of Pimas wrote letters to Congress, including Narcisse Porter, John Seoto and Howard Sanderson, who pleaded with Congress to restore “our water rights in the Gila River.”

Two events in 1912 impacted irrigation work on the reservation. On February 14, 1912, after 49 years as a territory, Arizona was admitted as the 48th state in the Union. For the first time, the people of Arizona elected their own representatives to Congress, rather than relying on Presidential appointees. Accordingly, Arizona citizens elected Democrats Henry Ashurst to the US Senate and Carl Hayden to the House of Representatives.

That same year, Dr. Alexander J. Chandler opened the San Marcos Hotel in Chandler as a desert resort for the wealthy and famous. Many of Chandler’s guests made day visits to Casa Grande Ruins National Monument, then accessed by a poorly maintained dirt road across the reservation. Crossing the Gila River—especially in flood season—created a challenge for Chandler, who then embarked on a campaign to persuade Congress to build a bridge over the river. This would one day become Olberg Bridge.

When Stephens introduced his bill, Hayden, a member of the House Committee on Indian Affairs, startled his colleagues by opposing it. Litigation, the freshman Congressman argued, “would not give the Pima lands as much moisture as was to be found in the ink of the signature of the judge

who would sign such as decree.” A judge could not make it rain and no judge could stop the river from flooding, Hayden reasoned. Besides, the loss of Pima water, Hayden asserted, was “not due in any great measure to diversions” from the river, but was the result of environmental changes within the Gila River watershed.

Hayden convinced the Committee to kill the bill, and instead worked to gain support for building a storage dam on the Gila River that would rival Roosevelt Dam on the Salt River. Such a dam would aid the Pima and Maricopa and their non-Indian neighbors in the Florence-Casa Grande Valley. In August, Congress authorized the US Army Corps of Engineers to determine the feasibility of a storage dam on the Gila River. Within two years, the Corps concluded such a storage dam was indeed feasible, further encouraging Hayden in his resolve to bring a second reclamation project to Arizona. The hopes of the Pima and Maricopa now appeared to rest on a joint-use reclamation project that would benefit all farmers along the Gila River.

Heavy flooding in the winter of 1912 again destroyed Pima-Maricopa brush diversion dams. By the time the necessary repairs could be made, the floodwaters had receded and the Indians were again without water. Special Indian Agent Charles E. Ellis, reporting on the floods in April of 1912, explained that an inexpensive diversion dam could be constructed on the east end of the reservation. Sand and stone were in abundance, Ellis told Indian Commissioner Robert Valentine, and the Pima were “excellent and willing” workers and would “welcome this chance to work.” Graves Moore, Supervisor in Charge of the Agency, informed Valentine that the Pimas benefited less and less each year from the floodwaters due to additional upstream diversions. “It has nearly demoralized them,” Graves wrote, “and should another series of delays be forced upon them it is a grave question as to whether or not they would ever regain their past confidence.”

New concerns over Pima-Maricopa water rights were raised when Agency Superintendent Frank Thackery informed Valentine that landowners near Florence were seeking to build another diversion canal, one that would further diminish the water supply. The Pinal Mutual Irrigation Company of Florence had incorporated in March of 1911 with the intent of building a canal to deliver water to its members’ lands near Florence. Pinal Mutual planned to head a new canal above the old Florence Canal on the Gila River (near the present location of Ashurst-Hayden Diversion Dam) and then build it parallel to the old Florence Canal for twenty miles. While it hoped to secure federal support and funds for construction, the company decided it would no longer wait for federal action.

Consulting engineer James Schuyler, who had earlier investigated Pima water issues, projected the new canal could convey a maximum of 108,000 acre-feet of water seven years out of ten. This would be enough water to irrigate no more than 25,000 acres of land. “While such flush seasons may often occur, the years when the river is low or nearly dry during April, May, and June are of such frequent occurrence,” Schuyler wrote, as to limit irrigation operations and force farmers “to confine their crops to grain alone rather than to ... the growing of alfalfa, which a constant supply of water would permit.” Grain crops planted in late fall or early winter would not be affected by this shortage of water if they were irrigated before the dry out set in. As an auxiliary supply of water, Schuyler recommended sinking twenty 15-inch wells to pump groundwater.

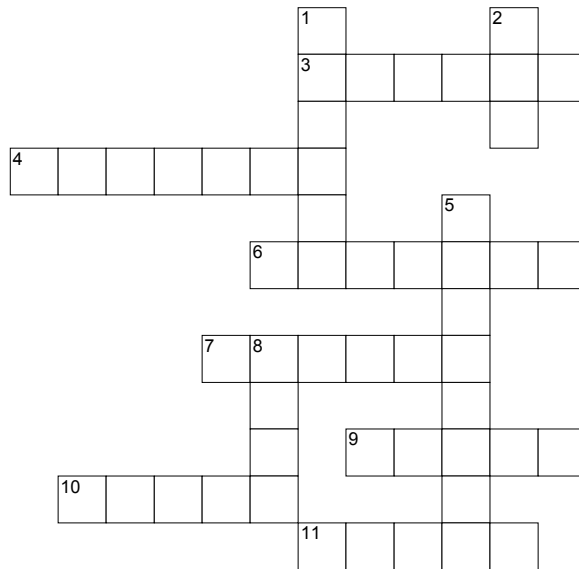
Forced to act, the Interior Department asked Assistant US Attorney John Truesdell to investigate Pima claims and rights to the water. Truesdell was convinced the Pimas had prior and legitimate claims to the waters of the Gila River. As part of his investigation, he gathered data on water usage and agricultural production for both the Pimas and their upstream neighbors, concluding that the Pima did indeed have prior rights.

Irrigation engineer Charles Real Olberg, who reviewed the data gathered by Truesdell, did not believe it was morally right to take water from upstream users after they had put the water to good use with the blessing and approval of the United States Government. In an effort to settle the increasingly complex water rights challenge, Olberg recommended the construction of two diversion dams on the

Gila River. This would “be of material and immediate benefit” to the reservation, Olberg reasoned, and partially solve Pima water needs. Two diversion dams—one above Florence and one on the reservation—could divert water to the Indians and protect the rights of upstream users. In February of 1914, the Army Corps of Engineers agreed that even if a storage dam was not built at San Carlos, a diversion dam should be constructed above Florence. Water could then be transported through a 31-mile long canal “to improve irrigation conditions on the Pima Reservation.” If the Florence diversion dam were not possible, then a diversion dam was to be built at the head of the Little Gila River (in District 1) to capture a “portion of the return flow” of the upstream users in the Florence area.

By 1914, Congress was open to the idea of constructing some type of diversion dam—if it would benefit the reservation first and foremost. Congress was well aware of Pima water abuses and needs, and Hayden was determined to use this to the advantage of all Pinal County farmers. If a joint-use system could be constructed, Hayden reasoned, it would be a win-win situation for everyone. It was now a matter of convincing Congress of the justice of developing such a project.

A Joint-Use Irrigation Project



Constructed using Crossword Weaver

DOWN

1. This Pima man wrote a letter to Congress asking for the return of Pima water.
2. Abbreviation for the Indian Rights Association.
5. After 1914, it was clear that Pima-Maricopa water rights rested on this type of project.
8. He wrote the Pima *Appeal for Justice*.

ACROSS

3. He was the irrigation engineer who encouraged building two diversion dams.
4. He was Arizona’s Democratic Senator who supported the San Carlos project.
6. This territory became a state in 1912.
7. This freshman Representative from Arizona believed the loss of Pima water was due to environmental factors.
9. These dams continually washed away in time of flood.
10. San Marcos was one of these built by A.J. Chandler.
11. To maintain their farming heritage, the Pima and Maricopa needed this.

Teacher Plan for “A Joint-Use Irrigation System?”

Terms to know and understand

- Diversion dam
- Redress
- Agrarian
- Neglect
- Adjudicate
- Litigation

Critical Thinking:

- In 1919, Wendell M. Reed, Superintendent of Irrigation, described his concern about future generations of Pima and Maricopa young people farming the land. Reed noted many of the people were “demoralized” from lack of water and that the amount of land cultivated by Community members fluctuated depending on the success or failure of the prior year’s crop. Young people today are 4 or 5 generations removed from their agricultural heritage. Discuss ways young people can be encouraged to farm today, keeping in mind the Community’s imminent water settlement of 653,500 acre feet of water (which will supply up to 146,330 acres of agricultural land). Why might it be important for young people to consider a career in agriculture?

Activities

- The Pima *Appeal for Justice*, written by Antonio Azul’s son, Antonito Azul, moved John Stephens of Texas into action (see Part 20 for the Pima *Appeal for Justice*). Have students (individually or in groups) write a persuasive essay giving reasons for supporting or rejecting the development of a joint-use (Indian and non-Indian) irrigation system. Then have students discuss the issues. List the arguments on the board as students discuss them. You may wish to have students individually write a summary of the pros and cons of the matter.
- Discuss with students that after the 1902 act creating the US Reclamation Service (Bureau of Reclamation) non-Indian irrigation projects began to spring up across the West, creating more demands on Indian waters. In 1908, the US Supreme Court in the Winter’s decision upheld the “reserved rights” of Indian tribes to the waters needed to make their reservations a permanent home. Together, the Reclamation Act and the “Winter’s Doctrine” created competing groups vying for control of the water resources in the arid West. On the one hand, the federal government encouraged settlement of the West and on the other hand it upheld Indian rights to the water. It was only a matter of time before there would be a collision between these competing interests.

About P-MIP

The Pima-Maricopa Irrigation Project is authorized by the Gila River Indian Community to construct all irrigation systems for the Community. When fully completed, P-MIP will provide irrigation for up to 146,330 acres of farmland. P-MIP is dedicated to three long-range goals:

- Restoring water to the Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh.
- Putting Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh rights to the use of water to beneficial use.
- Demonstrating and exercising sound management to ensure continuity of the Community’s traditional economy of agriculture.

Students will be able to:

1. Explain Carl Hayden’s reasoning for opposing litigation and favoring a joint-use irrigation system.
2. Write a persuasive argument opposing or supporting a joint-use irrigation system.

Objectives