

Afterword

The old saying “the more things change, the more they stay the same” is aptly applied to water, especially along the U.S.-Mexican and California-Baja California borders. Over the decade-and-a-half of the Southwest Consortium for Environmental Research and Policy’s (SCERP) investigation of border water issues, binational proposals by various agencies to address and solve challenges on both sides have come and gone. Other plans, problematic as they may be to binational relationships, persist and eventually reach fulfillment.

From the U.S. perspective, lining the All-American Canal seems an uncontroversial, if mildly, expensive way to deliver more water to thirsty coastal cities. Examined in a regional and long-term context, it is revealed to be contestable, contentious, and confounding. While a whole volume would be needed to properly explain the U.S. perspective, a few notes are warranted here to provide such context and to update issues raised in this volume.

As this Afterword is written in the last days of 2005, several lawsuits challenge the canal’s lining. One pronounces that the Imperial Irrigation District (IID) did not have the right to sell farmers’ water. After decade-long negotiations, IID had finally agreed to sell portions of its water rights to San Diego. The water would be “wheeled” through existing pipes from farther north on the Colorado River through Los Angeles to San Diego. While the suit relates more to water saved by conservation and fallowing agricultural fields, it involves the water saved by lining the canal and contends that water made available through conservation should be applied to the most beneficial and equitable use and that transferring it out of the basin is neither. Another suit launched by California ecological groups contends that wetlands on the Mexican side of the border that harbor endangered species would dry up as a result of the lining.

Lining the All-American Canal: Competition or Cooperation for the Water in the U.S.-Mexican Border?

Local transborder cooperation on water issues waxes and wanes. The joint investigation of a binational aqueduct to convey water from the Mexicali-Imperial Valley to San Diego and Tijuana, as mentioned several times in the book, seemed a turn toward cooperation and even collaboration on regional water problems. But that potential joint effort was short lived. The San Diego County Water Authority (SDCWA) withdrew its support for such a project soon after a lengthy and elaborate feasibility study and immediately after a survey of users' perceptions of the binational project, which was never made public. Instead, the SDCWA is again pursuing unilateral desalination options at Encina and San Onofre, again after an inquiry into the relative costs and benefits of joint projects. While these projects may be significantly cheaper to build, they may portend to be much more expensive in the long-term due to energy costs and associated air quality impacts.

At the same time, SCERP sees encouraging signs of binational cooperation over water at the most local of scales. The California Resource Agency's Salton Sea recovery plan environmental impact review/statement carefully explains that all transboundary environmental impacts must be assessed and considered. Water districts immediately contiguous with the border are looking south to solve their water supply challenges. The entire Tijuana watershed is being considered the first transboundary basin to have a binational plan and a mechanism for addressing issues. A recently installed emergency connection allows either San Diego or Tijuana to get emergency supplies of water "wheeled" through the other in cases of disruption by earthquake or terrorism. Finally, plans to recover effluent from the International Wastewater Treatment Plant and convert it to useable water for Mexico are moving forward.

While the lining of the All-American Canal may move forward in early 2006, other water issues are being resolved with an eye across the border for cooperative opportunities to devise, design, and build better projects.

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