

# Encyclopedia of Politics of the American West

Reclamation, U.S. Bureau of

Contributors: Steven L. Danver

Print Pub. Date: 2013

Online Pub. Date: May 21, 2013

Print ISBN: 9781608719099

Online ISBN: 9781452276076

DOI: 10.4135/9781452276076

Print pages: 570-572

This PDF has been generated from SAGE knowledge. Please note that the pagination of the online version will vary from the pagination of the print book.

10.4135/9781452276076.n339

Population increases and economic development in the West during the late nineteenth century led to the recognition that dependable water access was crucial to the sustenance of human life and economic activity. This period saw Congress enact legislation promoting irrigation projects and authorizing studies of irrigation potential in the West. These efforts culminated in June 1902 when Congress and President Theodore Roosevelt's administration enacted legislation (Pub. L. 57–161) creating, within the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), the U.S. Reclamation Service (USRS). This was later renamed the Bureau of Reclamation (USBR).

USRS was given responsibility for developing and ratifying interstate compacts governing stream-flow sharing between states and international treaties governing such sharing with Canada and Mexico. USRS's organic statute also directed it not to interfere with state or territorial water appropriation, control, distribution, or use laws. Other key agency emphases included the following: users who benefited from federal funding of reclamation water projects would repay the government; those projects would remain federal property even after users repaid their share of the costs; project construction work usually would be contracted to the private sector; agency employees administering contracts and inspecting construction would ensure contractor work met government specifications; and hydroelectric power revenues would be used to repay project construction charges.

USRS separated from USGS in 1907 to become an independent Interior Department bureau, and USRS was renamed the Bureau of Reclamation (USBR) in 1923. The 1928 congressional authorization of the Boulder Canyon Project (Hoover Dam) saw authorization of large amounts of federal funds to USBR, which authorized construction of the dam and ratified the Colorado River Compact. During the Great Depression, Congress authorized USBR to construct nearly forty additional water projects, including California's Central Valley Project and Colorado's Big Thompson Project, which promoted infrastructure development and created public works jobs. Through 1968, USBR undertook more than 180 construction projects, including the Pick-Sloan Missouri Basin Program, Grand Coulee Dam, and Central Arizona Project. These projects delivered agricultural water, irrigating nearly 10,000,000 acres in the West; this

represented about one-third of western irrigated acreage and one-third of water used in the West.

These projects were funded through the adroit use of congressional earmarks by legislators such as Sen. Carl Hayden (1877–1972), D-Ariz., who served as a key figure on the Senate Appropriations Committee. Funding for these projects was facilitated by Congress's lumping them into a single bill, making it difficult for legislators to vote against “bad” projects because the “good” projects were in the same bill and forcing the president to either accept or veto all the projects at the same time. Interest groups—including federal bureaus, congressional committees, agribusinesses, construction companies, and local interests—favored these projects regardless of other partisan or ideological differences, and that helped facilitate their development.

While they have enhanced western water supply, these USBR projects have also caused controversy. In the USBR's early years, concern existed that reclamation water projects would injure American Indian water rights. The 1908 U.S. Supreme Court decision *Winters v. United States*, 207 U.S. 564, delayed development of Montana's Milk River project for several years. It also established the Winters Doctrine, which maintained that tribes with reservations possessed reserved water rights in sufficient quantities to meet reservation needs and that these rights dated from the day when the treaty or executive order establishing the reservation had gone into effect. Consequently, congressionally authorized, federally funded reclamation projects could not take precedence over reserved tribal water rights.

Environmental controversy also affected USBR projects. Between 1908 and 1912, public opposition over plans to [p. 570 ↓ ] build a dam on Lake Tahoe, as part of the Newlands Project, resulted in the dam not being built. During the 1950s, controversy over construction of the Echo Park Dam in Dinosaur National Monument increased public awareness of problems involved with dam construction in a national park. During the 1960s, written works such as Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* and legislation such as the 1964 Wilderness Act (Pub. L. 88–577), the 1966 National Historic Preservation Act (Pub. L. 89–665), and the 1973 Endangered Species Act (Pub. L. 93–205) reflected public concern over adverse environmental impacts of reclamation projects, including negative impacts on animal habitats, water temperatures, and historical and archaeological treasures.

*Illustration from 1919 showing the principal irrigation projects in the western part of the United States*



source: From *The U.S. Reclamation Service: Its History, Activities and Organization*. New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1919, p. 25.

Today, USBR manages many outdoor recreation properties and provides flood control and drought mitigation services. Farmers whose lands are watered by reclamation [p. 571 ↓] projects produce 60 percent of U.S. vegetables. The bureau's influence and staffing has declined since the Clinton administration (1993–2001), and the bureau's main focus today is on water management projects.

Albert T. Chapman

10.4135/9781452276076.n339

See also

Further Readings

Pisani, Donald J. "The Bureau of Reclamation and the West, 1945–2000 ." Nevada Historical Society Quarterly vol. 43 , no. 4 (2000): pp. 363–83.

Pisani, Donald J. Water and American Government: The Reclamation Bureau, National Water Policy, and the West, 1902–1935 . Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002.

Storey, Brit Allan. Brief History Bureau of Reclamation . Washington, DC: U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, 2011. <http://permanent.access.gpo.gov/gpo6027/2011NEWBRIEFHISTORYV1.pdf> (accessed September 8, 2011).