The Colorado River Story

Cutting off a lifeline

Plans to line the seeping All-American canal spell certain doom to Mexican farms that capture their water from it.

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IN THE EARLY 1900S, when the Imperial Valley first was irrigated, the Colorado River ran through Mexico before reaching California. The Imperial Valley (top) is a rich and over-worked area based on the replenishing qualities of the Colorado. Note that the fields stop at the border, with arid land in Mexico to the south (bottom).
(Photo by P.K. Weis/Tucson Citizen)

MEXICALI VALLEY, Baja California - "What will we leave for our children? We will not be like Santa Anna. He gave the land; we will not give the water!"

So says Manuel Aguilar, president of the Mexicali Valley Farmers Union, about Antonio López de Santa Anna, the dictator who lost more than half of Mexico to the U.S. in the 1840s.

Farmers in old jeans pack the room at Ejido Lázaro Cárdenas, a land cooperative south of the border near Yuma.

The U.S. has decided to line the All-American Canal, which brings Colorado River water to the Imperial Irrigation District along the border.

This district is so important, the U.S. allots it 3.1 million acre-feet of the river's water every year - more than Arizona and Nevada combined, says Phoenix attorney Bill Swan, who represents the district.

Imperial Valley crops, planted on about 100,000 acres, are worth $1.2 billion a year.

But 100,000 acre-feet of water are lost each year because the canal is unlined, the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation estimates.

The water seeps south into Mexico, where farmers use it.

If the seepage stops, so will the productivity of border cooperatives producing alfalfa, asparagus, cabbage, celery, cilantro, cotton, green onions, lettuce, maize and wheat.

Most of the crops are exported to the U.S., Europe and Asia.

About 37,500 acres would lose all water, says Aguilar, a farmer and agricultural engineer.

He is one of the lucky ones. "My lands are part of the irrigation district and are irrigated by canals. The unlucky ones are the farmers who pump water from the ground to water crops."

Environmentalists also are worried. The seepage has created thousands of acres of wetlands in Mexico - home to many rare birds found only in this region.

Farmers and environmentalists object that the saved water would not go for crops or conservation but for golf courses, lawns and pools in San Diego and Los Angeles.

When the Imperial Valley first was irrigated in the early 1900s, the Colorado River water passed through the Alamo Canal, a natural wash that runs through Mexico.
Fearing that Mexico could cut them off, American farmers pressured the government to build an "All-American" canal. It was completed in 1934. A 1944 treaty obligated the U.S. to allot 1.5 million acre-feet of Colorado River water to Mexico.

In exchange, the U.S. was guaranteed 350,000 acre-feet from the Rio Grande, whose main tributaries are in Mexico. Seepage from the All-American Canal was not even contemplated. No one knew it was leaking.

Mexican farmers and activists say this water belongs to them, because they had been using it long before signing the treaty. The treaty says each country will consult the other on any changes of infrastructure, notes Jesús Adolfo Román Calleros, head of the hydrology department at the University of Baja California. "Lining the canal is a direct violation, because not only hasn't the United States formally consulted Mexico, but they also are building a parallel lined canal to the existing one, a definite infrastructure," he says.

Not so, says Sally Spener, public affairs officer for the U.S. delegation to the International Border Water Commission. "The fact that we are lining a canal parallel to the existing one does not matter. It will still be the All-American Canal."

The treaty created the IBWC to settle disputes and ensure that both countries meet treaty conditions. Spener says Mexico was informed in the early 1990s that the canal would be lined. Yet the lining will take water not only from Mexican farms, but also from American ones. It likewise will hurt American farmers in Mexico.

"After the lining of the canal, there will be less water for crops," says Bob Boelts of J.V. Farms, an American company that has farmed in the Mexicali Valley for 18 years. "It has become easier to farm in Mexico," he says. "Before, you needed a Mexican partner."

Now you don't."

As a result, Mexican farmers compete with richer Americans who can farm on a larger scale. Many Mexicans have leased their lands to Imperial Valley farmers from across the line. U.S. farmers benefit from cheaper labor, fewer worker benefits and access to Mexico's Colorado River water.

After the recent union meeting, Feliciano "Don Chano" Solorio Ramírez drives home toward Algodones, seven miles southwest of Yuma. On the way, he compares his lands with adjacent farms that Americans lease. Those laser-leveled fields resemble huge, neat, perfectly square rugs. "They are very well cared for," admits Don Chano.

Now in his late 60s, he has lived in this valley and worked these lands since he was 10. His father originally owned his farm. Like his neighbors, he mostly grows wheat. His deep-green fields, irrigated with canal seepage, contrast sharply with the surrounding dunes.

"When I was a child, this was nothing but desert," Don Chano says. "It was my generation who made this what it is today, and now they want to take it from us."

He says his six children have decided, "There is no future for farmers in Mexico."

Two daughters and one son are teachers; another daughter is a librarian. His lawyer son immigrated to the U.S. to work in construction. The youngest repairs air conditioners.

This summer, the U.S. will begin lining the All-American Canal. A federal judge in Nevada ruled in July against two American environmental groups and the economic development council in Mexicali. The lawsuit claimed that because Mexico was using this seepage water even before the 1944 treaty, it has first priority. A new lawsuit has been filed, claiming the plan is unsafe to humans and to endangered species.

Even if Mexico wins, farmers such as Don Chano have already lost. "American farmers are taking our water and the land we inherited from the Colorado River, some of the most fertile in the world."