



DEALING IN WATER

Imperial Valley, California

HORAN

This summer's historic deal to transfer water from Imperial Valley agricultural users to San Diego may be the prick that bursts the bubble of controversy over water usage in California. Pressure has been building for decades: with the oldest water rights on the Colorado River, Imperial Valley farmers pay a mere \$12.50 per acre-foot when the going rate in southern California ranges from \$250.00 to astronomical. The farmers stand to make windfall profits by "ranching" water--using it not for irrigation, but for resale to urban water authorities. But doing so could sacrifice their farming way of life. Long a player--some say bully--in California water schemes, Los Angeles's Metropolitan Water District has to be part of the deal because its aqueduct system is needed for delivery up and over California's high desert.

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Urban development in arid southern California has always been dependent on new sources of water. Imperial Valley developers and farmers first diverted the Colorado River across 55 miles of sand dunes and desert scrub in 1911 to make the low, hot land bloom. The Imperial Irrigation District consequently holds the rights to 3 million acre-feet of it per year. Flattened up against the Mexican border, the valley of 150,000 people grows thirsty crops like alfalfa, melons and sudan grass and takes six times the amount of Colorado River water going to the MWD. While 90% of California's water goes to agriculture, all those people with lawns and new homes are a political juggernaut screeching for more.

What we decide to do with the water is what we decide to do with the land.

--K.H., August, 1998



Imperial Valley: Tracing the border with Mexico, the All American Canal slices through the Algodones Dunes on the way to the fields



Imperial Valley: Just on the edge of the irrigated region, plentiful water is only a dream



Imperial Valley: Sluiced off the Colorado River, the Coachella branch leads through the Algodones Dunes to the valley's rich farm land



Imperial Valley: Thirsty and green, Sudan grass is grown here for export to the Japanese dairy industry



Campers at Imperial Dam get an early start on the Fourth of July



L.A.-bound water from the Colorado River is pumped uphill through one of three metal pipes in the high desert



Charged with getting enough water to southern California, Metropolitan Water District g.m. John Wodraska looks over the canal leading from the Colorado River to a desert pumping station



Imperial Valley: Irrigation canal in the heart of the valley east of Brawley



Imperial Valley: Cracked by a thorough soaking, this field is an attempt to grow a hybrid corn in the desert.



Imperial Valley: Louise Willey, 78, long-time farmer and defender of the valley's water, with a new Interceptor canal funded by the MWD and designed to save agricultural run-off



Imperial Valley: Mike Clinton, manager of the Imperial Irrigation District, along the Central main Canal at the edge of El Centro, Calif.



Imperial Valley: The Central Main Canal carries water away into the sunset



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