

Pima-Maricopa Irrigation Project

Education Initiative



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

No Water for Irrigation**Part 12**

In 1902, the United States Government enacted into law the National Reclamation Act. This law for the first time provided direct federal support for the development of irrigation projects across the arid west. Initially, reclamation projects focused on public—rather than private—lands. Since there were large tracts of public (i.e., federal) lands in the Gila River and Casa Grande Valleys, most Arizonans believed that the Gila River Valley would receive the first federal reclamation project in Arizona. They also believed the Gila River Valley would be selected because of the well known “Pima water abuses.” Residents of the Salt River Valley, which was largely made up of privately owned land, were also seeking a storage dam and flood control system and wanted federal support.

The Akimel O’otham had suffered from a lack of water since the late 1800s. In 1887, R.G. Wheeler, Indian agent at Pima Agency, wrote to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs that the Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh had “ample lands” but had “no water for irrigation.” Fifteen years later J.B. Alexander repeated Wheeler’s words: “The reservation contains good irrigable lands but lacks the chief essential—water.” The prime reason was the construction of the Florence Canal (later known as the Florence-Casa Grande Canal) in 1886, which diverted nearly all the water of the Gila River above the Community. This canal, Wheeler predicted, will “practically destroy the farms of the Pima and Maricopa Indians living [along] the river.”

The US Attorney General was asked by the Secretary of the Interior in the spring of 1886 to “take the necessary steps to protect the [Pima-Maricopa] from the effects of the projected canal.” But he did nothing. No action was taken in part because the land of the Community was still communally owned, not being allotted until the 1910s. The federal government was in no hurry to protect communal water rights, seeking instead to allot land to individual members before settling the water claims. In the end, parts of the Community were allotted but water rights were not fully protected.

In the summer of 1886 the US Geological Survey (USGS) was asked to look into the concerns of the Community. The USGS concluded that “the construction of a dam by the Florence Canal Company ... will give the control substantially of all the water of the Gila River [to the canal company] and if the owners of the dam carry the water right also, they can deliver the water to the reservation or not, as best suits their plans.” If the water supply were cut off, Community lands “would become uninhabitable.”

Meanwhile, the Salt River Valley—already more populous and better prepared—lobbied Congress for federal financing of a reclamation project. As early as 1889, Salt River Valley officials had identified sites on the Salt River for possible dam locations, including one at the confluence of the Salt River and Tonto Creek (site of today’s Roosevelt Dam). In 1895, New York-based Hudson Reservoir and Canal Company filed a claim on the Tonto Creek site and proposed to build a storage dam and canal system to irrigate both the Salt and Gila River valleys.

While the Gila River Valley relied on government reports and the need for delivering water to Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh lands, the Salt River Valley organized the Salt River Valley Water Storage Committee to resolve water rights conflicts, identify potential dam sites and lobby Congress. In 1901, the Maricopa County Board of Water Storage Commissioners was established and began looking at ways to issue county bonds to build a storage reservoir on the Salt River. The Gila River Valley, still convinced that the federal government’s obligation to supply water for the “Pima Reservation” would ensure federal support for their storage reservoir, did little.

Throughout the 1890s, Congress debated the role and extent of federal support and involvement in reclamation projects in the Western United States. While a series of federal reclamation bills were introduced in Congress, none provided direct federal money to construct storage reservoirs. One bill became law, in 1894, and provided grants of federal land to the states, which could then sell the land and use the money to help finance reclamation projects.

In 1888, Congress authorized the first water resources investigation of western lands. Under this act the hydrologic branch of the USGS set out to measure water supplies, identify reservoir sites and map areas that could be irrigated. The following year, hydrologist Frederick Newell arrived in Arizona to review “a portion of the Salt and Gila river drainage.” Within a year, Newell was looking at a variety of reservoir sites in the Gila River Valley. By 1893, he had hooked up with Charles Walcott (Director of the USGS) and Arthur Davis, a hydrologic engineer. Between the three of them, they established a national irrigation policy. This policy, however, did not include Indian Country. While the Bureau of Indian Affairs encouraged agriculture in Indian Country—and in fact provided agricultural equipment and seed to Indian farmers—it did little to provide the water necessary for agriculture to succeed in Indian Country.

In 1895, Congress appropriated \$3,500 for the USGS to conduct an irrigation study for the benefit of the Gila River Indian Community. Newell assigned Arthur Davis to complete this study. In his report, Davis noted that outside of forcing the upstream users to “turn back into the river an amount of water equal to that formerly employed by the Indians” the only real option to provide water to the Community was to build a 170’ tall masonry dam at a site on the Gila River capable of storing 200,000 acre feet of water. This dam could be on Queen Creek (27,000 acre-feet of storage) or at The Buttes on the Gila River (208,000 acre-feet of storage). The latter amount would provide water for the “Pima Reservation” and “leave a large surplus to be sold to settlers on Government lands under the canal system.” Outside of a dam, Davis recommended the use of pump water from the underground flow of the Gila River or the purchase of water from the Salt River Valley and the construction of a canal to the Community.

Davis did not think it was feasible to deliver water from the Salt River Valley to the Community through a “highline canal.” The cost of diverting water far enough up in the Salt River Canyon to transport it across the desert and deliver it to the Community would be too high. In addition, it would be impractical to deliver water to the east end of the Community where the land was “most desirable and where most of the cultivation” was. Because of this, water would have to be delivered to the central part of the Community (Sacaton-Casa Blanca areas) where few people lived at the time.

At the same time, the Hudson Reservoir and Canal Company secured a right of way across the Community for the purpose of delivering Salt River Valley water to the Casa Grande Valley. As part of the right-of-way agreement, Akimel O’otham land located along the canal was eligible to receive water. But, as Davis had predicted, the cost of building this canal (\$3,000,000) was excessive and it was never built. In addition, the economic depression of the 1890s doomed the project from the beginning.

Arizona Territorial Governor Louis C. Hughes also encouraged the United States to build a storage dam on the Gila River. Playing on the water needs of the Gila River Indian Community, Hughes sought a project that could potentially irrigate 500,000 acres of land in the Gila River-Casa Grande Valley. This would “supply all the land required by these Indians for all time to come” and allow “a bonus” of off-reservation land to be “served with water from the proposed reservoir.”

By 1902, the annual requests of the agents assigned to the Pima Agency for the federal government to resolve “Pima water abuses” increased. While Congress appropriated \$20,000 for the USGS to evaluate and study two proposed dam sites, in 1898, it would not commit to any project. It is little wonder that Pima Agent J. Roe Young expressed his frustration by complaining “until the time comes when the Government is ready and willing to come to the assistance of [the Pimas], I consider any further discussion of the subject unnecessary.” Even Charles Walcott of the USGS noted the “matter of obtaining a permanent [water] supply for these Indians is one which has been before the Department in one form or another for fourteen years.” While Congress introduced a bill appropriating \$1,000,000 to study the San Carlos site, in 1900, it failed to enact it, instead appropriating another \$30,000 for the “support of the Indians at the Pima Agency.”

Teacher Plan for “No Water for Irrigation”

Terms to know and understand

- Reclamation
- Public lands
- Private lands
- Irrigable
- Hydrologist
- Reservoir
- Arid

Critical Thinking:

- The Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh had befriended the American settlers from their first contact in the 1840s. As more settlers arrived, they used more of the water that rightfully belonged to the O’otham and Pee Posh. Because of the unique federal-Indian political relationship, the United States has a responsibility to protect the resources of Indian nations and tribes. At the same time, a century ago, the United States was not involved with financing any large reclamation projects (although it had financed the building of a National Road and a series of canals in the eastern United States in the early 1800s). What responsibility did the United States have to ensure that the rights of the Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh—and other Indian nations—were protected?

Activities

- How did the Salt River Valley and the Gila River Valley differ in their approach to securing a federally financed reclamation project? Which one looked to “Pima water abuses” as their primary support? Which valley was better prepared and better organized? Why might this be important? Think about the dramatic shift in federal social policy by financing reclamation facilities in the arid West.
- Point out to students that the Gila River Indian Community has been seeking to have its rights to the use of the water restored since the late 1800s. Discuss with students why it might be important to understand the events of the past. What can we learn from the past?
- What is the difference between public land and private land? Upon which type of land was the National Reclamation Act focused? In 1903, the National Reclamation Act was amended to include private lands as well. This showed that the federal government was interested in a project that would reap great financial benefits. Which valley—the Salt River or the Gila River—benefited from this change in the law?

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 146,330 acres of farmland. P-MIP is dedicated to three long-range goals:

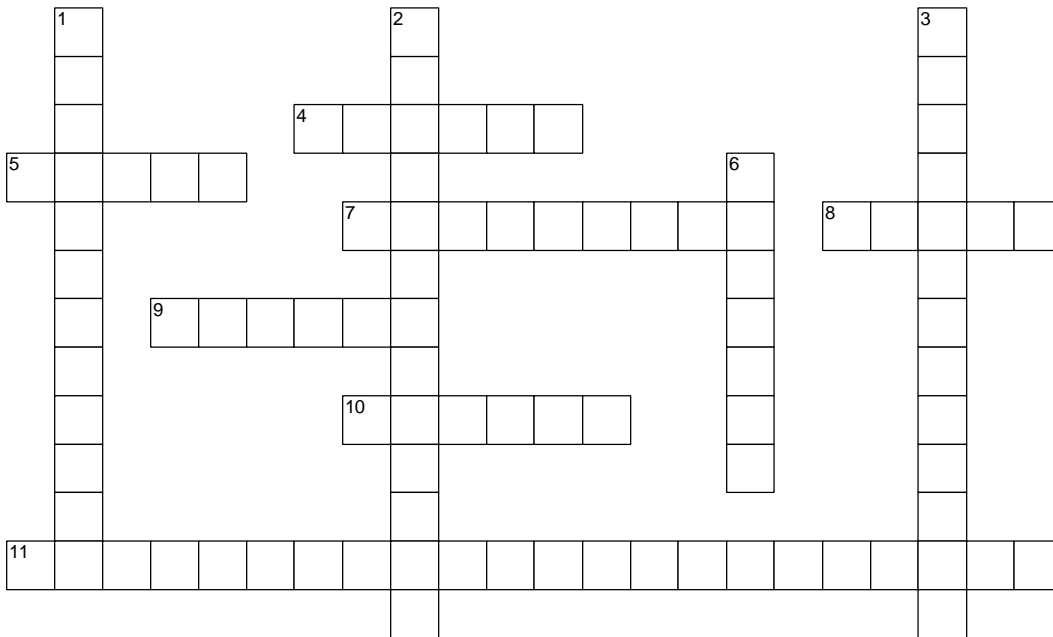
- Restoring water to the Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh.
- Putting Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh rights to the use of water to beneficial use.
- Demonstrating and exercising sound management to ensure continuity of the Community’s traditional economy of agriculture.

Students will be able to:

1. Discuss some of the political struggles occurring in the efforts to bring a reclamation project to the Gila River Valley.
2. Identify some of the potential Gila River Valley storage dam and reservoir sites proposed in the 1890s.

Objectives

No Water for Irrigation



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ACROSS

4. This company received a right-of-way across the Gila River Indian Community in 1897 and proposed to deliver Salt River Valley water to the Community. The _____ Reservoir and Canal Company.
5. What the Gila River Indian Community needed most:
7. The people from this valley were better prepared and lobbied Congress for a reclamation project:
8. There were two sites evaluated in the 1890s that might provide water to the Gila River Indian Community. The smaller site was called the _____ Creek site.
9. Lands owned by the United States are _____ lands.
10. The other site evaluated in the 1890s that might provide water to the Gila River Indian Community was called "The _____."
11. This 1902 law provided federal support for reclamation projects in the Western United States:

DOWN

1. The people in the Gila River Valley relied on the well-known water abuses of these people:
2. This part of the United States was excluded from the national irrigation policy:
3. This canal was built in 1886 and diverted nearly all of the water from the Gila River:
6. Lands that are owned by individual people are called _____ lands.