

THE LOS ANGELES TIMES

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FACING THE ISSUE

Water and the West

Water was essential to the development of the West, and it is indispensable to the region's future growth. The problems of water planning are discussed by U.S. Reclamation Commissioner Floyd Dominy in an interview with William Thorson of the Times Editorial Board.

The following is an excerpt from Mr. Thorson's interview with Commissioner Dominy:

Q. Do you consider the 160-acre limitation on farms served by reclamation projects to be outmoded in certain agricultural areas?

A. As an economist and as a farmer I'm very cognizant of the agricultural revolution that is and has taken place starting with World War II.

Farming as a way of life is entirely different now than it was pre-World War II. And I think that the federal reclamation law has failed to keep pace with the change in the business of agriculture.

Now that doesn't mean that I think the principle of federal assistance to irrigation to be spread as widely as economically feasible ought to be abandoned.

But I do think we ought to take a good look at the 160-acre per individual-ownership limitation in the light of agriculture in today's economic climate.

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Q. What is the current Interior Department attitude on the Imperial Irrigation District?

A. The solicitors of the Department of Interior ruled a year ago last December that the 160-acre limitation of federal reclamation law

does in fact apply to the Imperial Irrigation District although there had been a long history of actions to the contrary.

The Imperial District has filed a brief objecting to that ruling and it's my understanding that Interior and Justice Department attorneys have advised that this brief does not change the solicitor's opinion. But the department is very willing to cooperate in a court test and to have this settled once and for all.

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Q. Is a change in policy likely in the Imperial matter or in the overall 160-acre limitation in the Reclamation Law?

A. The Congress, a year or two ago, asked the Secretary of Interior to prepare information on the current status of excess land on our projects and to recommend any changes that he thought ought to be undertaken or considered by Congress.

That report is in its final stages. It will show that for the most part excess land law is being complied with on reclamation projects with very minor exceptions.

Farm Reporter**Acreage Size
And Irrigation****Henry Schacht**

Note:

Apart from Kern County Land Company's interest (and that of its 20,000 share owners) over the Isabella dispute, we feel the public interest also is at stake. The 160-acre limitation places Western irrigated farming in a position contrary to the national trend in agriculture as reported in Mr. Schacht's column. We also think the public should become aware of this, particularly since agriculture is California's No. 1 industry and over 30% of the jobs can be traced to agricultural activity.

---R.W. Jackson

RECENTLY WE WROTE a column quoting a well-known farm economics authority at Iowa State University. He is convinced that by 1980 the number of farms in this country will have been cut in half, and we so quoted him.

Comes now Charles Rummel, general counsel for the California Farm Bureau Federation, to say that this may go for the U.S. as a whole but in California, he thinks, odds are against it. In fact, he feels the same way about all the Western States where Federal reclamation has played, and is still playing, an important role in water development.

Reclamation law contains the famous (or infamous, depending upon the point of view) 160-acre limitation. This requires that over a period of years any property receiving federally financed water from a reclamation project must be limited to not more than 160 acres for one owner, or 320 acres for a man and wife. It was originally designed many years ago to prevent profiteering on Federal projects by owners of vast stretches of dry land.

California opponents of the limitation have held long and loudly that it should not apply in areas that were already well-developed under irrigation before the Federal projects were built. Nevertheless, the Government has continued to press the limitation.

A few months ago the limitation was extended to the large landholdings of the Imperial Valley even though this area had been granted a specific exemption by the Secretary of the Interior many years ago. The Valley has been largely developed by landowners under the assurance of the exemption.

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THIS IS A COMPLICATED issue which in too many reports before the public have been reduced to attacks on "bigness" or on "bureaucracy." We have long felt, and written, that it deserves far more public attention and understanding in the interests of the long-term economic welfare of our State.

This seems even more apparent now in view of Rummel's point that while the economic trend across the country is in the direction of larger and fewer farms, we find the acreage limitation in the West working in an opposite direction; that is, toward reduction of larger irrigated farms into smaller ones. A situation that opponents of the limitation say the writers of the original law in 1902 did not foresee. We do wonder if they foresaw the day of large irrigated farms in areas where maximum efficiency is only reached when size ranges from several hundred acres up.

A University of California study, for example, has indicated that in Kern County the most efficient operation measured by the highest net return per acre, as in farms of 640 acres.

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IN THAT SAME COUNTY the Department of Interior is in the process of breaking up the 4400-acre Sierra Vista Ranch owned by Di Giorgio Corporation under the provisions of this same acreage limitation. Rummel says that several years were required to figure out how to break up this integrated holding into parcels of not over 160 acres. Finally, it was split into 31 pieces of from 40 to 160 acres.

There has been no rush to buy them even though the original sale provisions have been relaxed by the Government to encourage buyers. Several pieces have been sold, but Di Giorgio continues to operate the rest. The case serves to illustrate that the implementation of the law is more complicated than the uninitiated might think.

We are neither water economist nor water lawyer, but if, as Rummel says, the 160-acre limitation places our irrigated farming in a position contrary to the national trend in agriculture, we think the public should be aware of it. Particularly in the number one agricultural State in the Union where over 30 percent of the jobs can be traced to agricultural activity.