

# Imperial Irrigation District

## *Water History*

Juan Bautista de Anza, a captain in the Spanish army, found only desert when he led an expedition across the area in the 18th century. De Anza encountered a wasteland so forbidding that, upon reaching San Gabriel Mission, he declared that he had made "la jornada de los muertos." Father Hermengildo Francisco Garces, who preceded de Anza, searched in vain for water in the desert and later aided de Anza in his journeys.

Travelers who followed encountered the same scorching barrier. Yet, as early as 1850, a few men of vision realized that the area could be made productive with an assured water supply. William P. Blake was one of the first to recognize the potential of the Imperial Valley. A geologist with a railroad survey party, Blake had passed through the desert in 1853 and had noticed the ancient shoreline at the foot of the mountains, which proved that at one time there had been an inland sea where now there was desert. Barometric readings taken by Blake proved that the desert lay below sea level and could be irrigated by a gravity-flow canal diverting from the Colorado River.

Another individual interested in the development of the desert was Dr. Oliver M. Wozencraft, who crossed through the area during the gold rush of 1849. In 1861, Wozencraft hired an engineer to take a survey and to recommend a location for a canal. He later succeeded in having legislation introduced into Congress authorizing development of the Imperial Valley. For many years, the Civil War delayed progress on the plan and Wozencraft died without seeing his dream become a reality. In 1901, the California Development Company began diversions into a canal, which had its heading in the United States and ran most of its length in Mexico before re-crossing the International Border into the Imperial Valley.

Silt problems requiring a temporary diversion in Mexico, and unusual winter floods on the Gila River tributary to the Colorado River, resulted in the entire flow of the Colorado River entering Imperial Valley from 1905 to 1907. This flood greatly enlarged the New and Alamo rivers and created what is known today as the Salton Sea. Imperial Irrigation District was formed in 1911 to acquire properties of the bankrupt California Development Company and its Mexican subsidiary.



## *Water History continued*

By 1922, the district had also acquired the 13 mutual water companies, which had developed and operated the distribution canals. By mid-1920, the district was delivering water to nearly 500,000 acres. Since 1942, water has been diverted at Imperial Dam on the Colorado River through the 80-mile-long All-American Canal, all of which the district now operates and maintains. IID is the largest irrigation district in the nation and ranks among the top 10 agricultural counties in the nation. Of the water IID transports, 98 percent is used for agriculture in the Imperial Valley. The remaining 2 percent is delivered to nine Imperial Valley cities that treat it to safe drinking water standards and sell it to their residents.

## *Water Rights*

IID has a “present perfected” right to 2.6 million acre-feet (MAF) of water annually. A 1964 Supreme Court decree in *California v. Arizona* defined these district water rights. The district’s present perfected rights were set at 2.6 MAF annually because that was the annual quantity being diverted by the district and used on the 424,145 acres under irrigation. These vested rights preempt the 1902 Reclamation Law and are not subject to reclamation law limitations. The significance of IID’s present perfected right is that in times of shortage, present perfected rights must be satisfied first.

## *Colorado River Compact*

The water of the Colorado River is used by both the upper basin states (Colorado, New Mexico, Utah and Wyoming) and the lower basin states (Arizona, California and Nevada), as well as by Mexico. In accordance with the Colorado River Compact, the upper and lower basin states are each entitled to the exclusive beneficial consumptive use of 7.5 MAF of Colorado River water each year, in perpetuity. In addition, an option is granted to the lower basin states for the use of an additional 1.0 MAF for beneficial consumptive use. The 1929 California Limitation Act limits California’s annual consumptive usage to 4.4 MAF, plus not more than one-half of any excess or surplus water not apportioned by the compact.





### *Treaty with Mexico*

By a treaty signed on February 3, 1944, Mexico is entitled to 1.5 MAF of Colorado River water each year. In years of low flow, any shortfall required to meet Mexican treaty rights will be made up in equal quantities by the upper and lower basin states.

### *Seven-Party Agreement*

The 1931 California Seven-Party Agreement states that the Palo Verde Irrigation District, the Imperial Irrigation District, the Yuma Project and lands in Imperial and Coachella valleys are to be served by the All-American Canal. In addition, 16,000 acres of mesa lands in the Palo Verde Irrigation District are entitled to 3.85 MAF annually with Priority 4 allocating 550,000 acre-feet annually to the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California. These first four California priorities total 4.4 MAF.

### *Present Perfected Rights*

Of the users described in the Seven-Party Agreement, only the Palo Verde Irrigation District, Imperial Irrigation District and the Reservation Division, Yuma Project California Division (non-Indian portion) have present perfected rights.