

My name is Don Villarejo and I am the Executive Director of the California Institute for Rural Studies. The research that I will describe today concerns the effects of Federal investment in irrigation projects in the West on the people and communities in the immediate locale of these projects. Of special concern is whether the benefits of the Federal investment has been widely shared among residents of these regions or whether they have received only a small share.

Federal irrigation projects are authorized by 1902 reclamation act. This law provides for federal construction of irrigation projects in the seventeen western states, an arid region of the U.S. that is larger than all of Europe. Most of this region is extremely arid, receiving less than 15 cm. of rainfall each year. The absence of rainfall means that crops can not be grown without irrigation water. On the other hand, the mild climate and persistent sunshine makes it possible to grow crops all year round if adequate irrigation supplies can be found.

The very great rainfall in the mountainous regions of the west, when stored in massive resevoirs behind Federal dams, becomes an abundant supply of irrigation water. Transport of this irrigation water across distances as great as from Paris to Madrid in Federal canals is also necessary. Private resources of farmers and ranchers could never meet the capital requirements of these large irrigation systems.

The reclamation law states that the benefits of the federal investment shall be as widely shared as possible. At present, the mechanism for ensuring wide sharing of benefits is a limitation on the amount of Federal water that a single user may receive. The limit is measured in acres: 960 acres irrigated with Federal water (388 hectares).

Our research shows that 87% of the farms receiving Federal water are smaller than 960 acres but these farms hold only 1/3 of the irrigated land. On the other hand, the 12% of the the farms which are larger than 960 acres have 2/3 of the land. We find that the Federal government has not carried out the law.

The largest farms have legally divided their holdings into separate farms, each smaller than 960 acres, but still operate them as though they are a single farm. On paper there are many separate farms but the tractors do not recognize the boundaries. And the crops, the workers, the chemicals, and the managers do not see any boundaries either.