

CRISIS COMES IN DIFFERENT FORMS

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In 1977, a very dry year, much like today but perhaps worse, local irrigators rebelled in response to a lack of adequate irrigation well pumping regulations in the lower Arkansas Valley which was preempting the surface water rights of the upper valley. The upper valley region, Fremont, Custer, Chaffee, and Lake counties were paying in water for the lower Arkansas Valley farms to pump in defiance of the doctrine of Prior Appropriation, the basis of the State's water law. The aquifer underlying the Lower Arkansas River was literally being sucked dry by the large irrigation wells on the farms there. This depauperized aquifer was claiming all the water delivered from forced closure of head gates, by the State's Water Division Engineer, in the Upper Valley.

Wells in those days were not regulated by the same rules as surface water. The State's well pumping rules were antiquated and it was believed by many that the water underground was not connected to the surface water. Of course, this was more a matter of convenient neglect than actual believed fact. The outcome of this disservice to the Upper Valley water users was the eventual creation of the Upper Arkansas Water Conservancy District. The local irrigators created the mission and purpose of the proposed District and defined the boundaries. The geographic region includes Custer County, Northern Fremont County, and Chaffee County. The mission and purpose of the District is to protect and augment the supply and storage of water for the beneficial use of the citizens in the Upper Arkansas Valley. Additionally, to protect Upper District water from exportation to other regions.

Today, it is obvious to those in the water community that a large "information vacuum" exists regarding water, water laws and water events and policy and thereby allows for the distortion of fact to the citizens of the region. Today as was true 20 years ago, when the District was formed, we are in a crisis A WATER FACT CRISIS. Much of this distortion surrounds the UAWCD'S blanket well augmentation decree. In this article, and others to follow we will explain well augmentation.

To begin, one must understand as far as possible the connection between surface water and underground water. More than one hundred years ago the lands in this region were not green fields and meadows, rather the land was dry, windblown and populated with sage and cacti. It was a high mountain desert landscape. Where there is no irrigation the land is much the same now as then. Many of the current director's ancestors, who pioneered this region in the 1860's to 1900, dug by animal and hand the ditches and canals in this area and diverted water from tributaries or directly from the main stem river, and delivered this water to irrigate their lands. Prior to these diversions and application of these waters to beneficial use, the Arkansas River would nearly dry-up by August. As irrigation increased across the land, the rivers and streams began to flow with more water and more consistently. Water through irrigation was being stored underground and would slowly return to the nearby streams. This is what we now refer to as return flow water - water returned to a stream via the underground storage or by running off from a nearby

field after irrigation. With the advent of transmountain diversion and the increasing of storage reservoirs more water was introduced to the valley and surface as well as underground water was augmented. Today, your Upper Arkansas Water Conservancy District participates in an on going study of ground water levels by the United States Geological Survey. Contrary to conventional wisdom, the water table of the region is on the rise. Much of this increase can only be attributed to transmountain water and the more extensive use of reservoir storage. Now as the use of land changes and more traditionally irrigated land is dried-up or irrigation practices change, the need will become greater for the UAWCD to acquire more water rights and store this water for replacement of stream depletions by well pumping.