

## ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY



NOAA FISHERIES

# Restoring the Waters

## 21<sup>st</sup> Century Progressive Movement at Work

By Sarah Bates

**ONE OF THE MOST DISTINCTIVE** physical legacies of the 19<sup>th</sup> century progressive era in the United States was an ambitious and successful effort to harness the mighty western rivers to provide water for irrigation and electricity for growing cities and industries. Today, nearly every river in the West is regulated by dams, locks, or diversions.

These dams and their extensive water distribution facilities fueled an engine of growth and prosperity that drew millions to the region. The dams on the Colorado River, for example, are capable of storing four years' worth of river flow. Problem is, the very infrastructure that makes the desert bloom has nearly destroyed the river's native fishery and has fundamentally altered the ecosystem it supports.

The same is true across the region. Damaged rivers and wetlands, endangered fish and wildlife, and impaired communities and economies that rely

on healthy, intact river systems are commonplace today. But the fact that our monumental western water infrastructure has hurt the environment is old news. The good news is the vast amount of work that is now underway to restore the region's rivers and their associated natural and human communities—developments that are not so well known.

We are, in fact, already well embarked upon a 21<sup>st</sup> century progressive era in the American West—one in which the federal agencies once known for the cubic yards of concrete they poured are now directing increasingly significant resources to restore rivers, wetlands, and riparian corridors. This is an encouraging movement, and one worth celebrating, encouraging, and publicly embracing.

The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, for example, got its start in 1902 in the same burst of legislation that gave rise to the Newlands Irrigation Project,

which diverted water from the Truckee River near the California–Nevada border to irrigate high-elevation desert farms. Unfortunately, the water flowing to Newlands depleted the river’s historical terminus, Pyramid Lake. Eventually, lake levels fell by 75 to 80 feet, nearly wiping out the native fish populations and thus preventing the Pyramid Lake Paiutes, whose reservation surrounds the lake, from exercising their historical fishing rights.

Decades later, following lawsuits and lengthy negotiations, Congress enacted in 1990 the Truckee-Carson Settlement Act, which directed the Bureau of Reclamation and other parties—including the states of California and Nevada, other federal agencies, the Paiute tribe, and private water interests—to find new ways to work together to restore the river, the lake, and the fisheries. This has proved to be a challenging mandate, but today an impressive multi-party restoration initiative is well underway.

The manager of this project for the Bureau of Reclamation, Elizabeth Rieke, previously served as the assistant secretary of water and science for the U.S. Department of the Interior. She possesses a keen grasp of federal water policy. Commenting on the changing mandates for federal water projects at a conference sponsored by the Buffalo Bill Historical Center in 2005, Rieke remarked: “We can build them, operate them, modify them, re-operate them, we can make them safe and secure, and we can take them down.”

Her message, in short, was that the same technical expertise that erected the West’s great water projects can be harnessed in new ways to benefit a broader range of public values.

For its part, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers—the agency responsible for constructing the largest flood-control dams in the nation—has embraced environmental protection and restoration as explicit objectives of its water resource management mission. In one example of its commitment to this new direction, the Corps entered into a “Sustainable Rivers” partnership with The Nature Conservancy in 2002 aimed at improving dam management to restore ecological health in the affected rivers.

River restoration projects are proliferating throughout the Rocky Mountain West. In some cases this means that dams are coming out of the rivers they once plugged. More commonly, federal agencies are operating dams in new ways to recreate historical downstream river conditions. In many places, restoration means putting the curves back into artificially straightened rivers, replacing riprap (stone or rubble dumped along river shores to combat erosion) with native vegetation to secure the banks, and “daylighting” rivers once buried in steel culverts under urban centers.

Earlier this year, onlookers cheered as Montana Gov. Brian Schweitzer declared, “Let ’er run,” and a large bulldozer breached the Milltown Dam, a few miles upstream from Missoula, Mont. Today, the waters of the Clark Fork and Blackfoot rivers run free for the first time in 100 years.

Another measure of success: A large Superfund cleanup project at the rivers’ confluence is underway to remove tons of contaminated sediment that flowed downstream from copper mines in Butte and stacked up behind the Milltown Dam, polluting the drinking water of nearby residents. The costs of such cleanups can be high, but the benefits can be enormous. Restoration work itself provides jobs for skilled laborers and professionals. The Milltown Dam removal currently employs about 80 people, ranging from heavy equipment operators to engineers and scientists.

Like the reclamation projects of the last century, today’s restoration initiatives represent an investment in the future, with long-term benefits for both the environment and its human inhabitants. By recognizing the value of this work and encouraging it through more explicit public policies, we can ensure a healthier and more prosperous future for all. That is the heart of a new progressive movement for the Rocky Mountain West. **SP**

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