



# AWWA DIRECTOR'S REPORT



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## **THE HISTORY OF THE CENTRAL ARIZONA PROJECT – WAS IT GOOD OR BAD?**

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**A**RIZONA OWNS THE RIGHT TO 2.8 MILLION ACRE-FEET OF COLORADO RIVER WATER PER YEAR. This decision was made in the early 1900's as the Western states' population began to increase and concerns about sustainability of ground water arose. The Central Arizona Project Association was formed in 1946, in an effort to inform Arizona citizens and urge Congress about the need for the Central Arizona Project (CAP), originally intended to provide water to agriculture within the state, and to increase its agricultural economy. In 1968 President Lyndon B. Johnson approved its construction, providing funding from the Bureau of Reclamation of the Department of the Interior, but requiring future repayment. By this time however, the state had experienced a change in farming and resource conditions; groundwater overdraft had developed into a concern as supplies reduced, and pumping from greater depths became more expensive. The CAP became viewed as an agricultural rescue program supplying imported surface water. Its construction finally began in 1973 on the shores of Lake Havasu, and was declared substantially complete after fifteen years of construction, with a four billion dollar price tag.

As the Arizona population grew once again in the late 1970's, the focus of the CAP was revised again. The Arizona Water Commission announced recommendations for CAP water to be allocated to municipal and industrial users, and although agriculture was still considered the main purpose of the program, demand by Arizona municipalities and industrial users grew and was recognized as increasingly significant. Planners sought a way to provide present agricultural needs while satisfying an escalating non-agricultural market. The resulting agreement called for distribution of the majority of CAP water to agriculture during its early years, but over time reallocating it to meet the demands of municipal and industrial users. CAP water, however, was not intended to increase overall usage; it was

designed to be a substitute for groundwater, solving its current overdraft of 2.5 million acre-feet.

At times, the project has become controversial among conservationists and economists. During its first decade, only 50 percent of CAP water was distributed to agriculture, compared to its expected 60-80 percent. The price for this water also shocked many, resulting in additional expenses not associated with alternate supplies of other types of water. This resulted in an overall reduction of water use. The reason for the high costs? The CAP was funded by the U.S. government, with the intentions that construction costs would be repaid. Farmers argued the high costs make it uneconomical for them to utilize the water. In addition, cotton production, the dominant crop of the CAP delivery area, has decreased continually. In addition, before any feature of the canal was built, there was a massive environmental impact study made to determine the likely impact on wildlife or the environment in the CAP area. The study resulted in the placement of wildlife bridges, fences, and watering holes ensuring all animals could cross and climb, in and out of the canal safely.

Adding to environmental effects, Colorado River water also used to reach the delta south of the border, near the Gulf of California. Before the construction of dams, the area was a place of beauty and wilderness but today, the delta has no vegetation and hardly any water ever reaches it. Besides affecting the wildlife in the area, its shrimp fisheries have also decreased and threatened marine species resulting in lawsuits against the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation. The U.S. and Mexico agreed to study the delta and explore ways of delivering more water to the region, but have yet to arrive at a solution.

Aside from all the advantages and disadvantages of the Central Arizona Project, it is important to recognize that it remains the largest and most expensive water transfer ever constructed in the United States, and still remains as the leading supplier of renewable water in the state of Arizona.

# TIMELINE OF THE CENTRAL ARIZONA PROJECT

**1946-**  
Central Arizona Project Association is formed; lobbies Congress for CAP construction.

**1973-**  
Groundbreaking begins in Lake Havasu

**1992-**  
First delivery of CAP water in Tucson, discontinued in 1994, reintroduced in 2001

**1968-**  
President Lyndon B. Johnson signs the CAP bill, beginning its construction.

**1985-**  
Colorado River water delivered to Western Arizona, including Phoenix.

**2006-**  
CAP users include municipalities, agriculture irrigation districts and Indian communities.