

THE EVOLUTION OF THE MIDDLE RIO GRANDE

CONSERVANCY DISTRICT

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The original Conservancy Act of New Mexico was enacted by the Legislature in 1923. The Conservancy Act made possible the formation of districts with the ability to make assessments for drainage, flood control, and irrigation. The Middle Rio Grande Conservancy District was formed by a small group of businessmen who desired to improve land values and stimulate the economy in the Middle Rio Grande Valley. Over a period of four decades, the irrigated land in the Valley had decreased by approximately 68 percent. Rising ground water caused water logged soil, alkaline and seeped areas. With the creation of the Middle Rio Grande Conservancy District and the construction of the drainage system in 1930s, the lowering of the water table was generally accomplished.

By 1936 the district has completed construction of El Vado Dam in northern New Mexico in order to have facilities to store water from early spring runoff for use by the irrigators in later summer when the flows of the Rio Grande diminished. The district also constructed four major

diversion dams, 190 miles of levees, 350 miles of drains and 250 miles of canals. This construction and the construction of the drainage system provided better control of the river and nearly doubled the irrigable land in the Middle Valley.

With the construction of Elephant Butte Dam in 1917, and the filling of this dam, the district faced new problems. The river channel above the lake filled with silt and no water would pass into Elephant Butte. Under the terms of the Rio Grande Compact, New Mexico was required to deliver to Elephant Butte approximately 58 percent of the Rio Grande water that passed through Otowi. If these deliveries were not made, there was a water debt owed to the state of Texas. In a debt situation, the district could not use the storage facilities at El Vado, or any other dam that it might construct. The district was destined to rely on the natural flows of the Rio Grande River. The district was not able to use the storage facilities of El Vado from the 1940s until recently. In the dry years the district contracted for water from the transbasin diversion of the San Juan River and borrowed water from other San Juan Chama contractors who had no present use for their water. The district used this water as supplemental water for its irrigators as best it could. However, many years there was not adequate water available.

When the district began the construction of its

facilities, it issued approximately \$8 million in bonds. By the mid-1940s, refinancing was required because all of the bonds were in default. The financial problems and the silt build up at Elephant Butte lead the district to enter into a contract with the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation in 1951. The ultimate benefits of this contract were: the channelization of the Rio Grande River for approximately 45 miles north of Elephant Butte to increase water deliveries to Elephant Butte; the payment of the outstanding bonds and a new loan from the federal government without interest; an upgrading and modification of its works; and an upgrading of the assessment procedures in the district.

The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation operated the Middle Rio Grande Conservancy District from the mid-1950s until 1975, when the operation and maintenance of the district was turned back to the district.

The last few years of the high flows in the Rio Grande have discharged the water debt owed to Texas and allowed the district to store Rio Grande water, but it has not needed to make use of this stored water because of the high flows in the river. If the recent high river flows cease, the district will again be relying on San Juan-Chama waters to provide waters to its irrigators.