Panelists from left: Ted Cox, John Clayshulte Sr. and Rudy Provencio

How We Dealt with the Drought of the '50s

Moderated by Gary Esslinger,
Manager, Elephant Butte Irrigation District

John Clayshulte, Sr. was born in Mesilla, New Mexico in 1920. After graduating from Las Cruces High School in 1938, he attended NM A&M where he graduated in 1942 with a degree in civil engineering. As an ROTC student, after graduation, he went directly into the Army Engineering Corp. He served in the European Theater and upon his return in 1945 he continued to enlarge the bee business started before he entered the service. He and his three sons have several small farms scattered throughout the Mesilla Valley. John served on the Elephant Butte Irrigation District Board from 1980-1999. His wife, Jeanne, also is a native of the Mesilla Valley.

Ted Cox was born in Canutillo, Texas, lives 4 miles west of Anthony, New Mexico and has been married to the same woman, and lived in the same house for 46 years. He is a fourth generation farmer in his family and currently farms 140 acres. In 1963 Ted bought a seed business, formerly known as Vinton Delinting Co., now known as Del Norte Seed and Feed, Inc. He graduated from Anthony Union High School in Gadsden. Ted studied agricultural engineering at New Mexico A&M. Ted and his wife, Patricia, have two children and one grandchild.

Rudy Provencio's family settled in the Mesilla Valley in the 1700s.Rudy studied agronomy and civil engineering at New Mexico State University and graduated with a degree in engineering. After graduation he worked for a construction firm in Houston, later returning to the Mesilla Valley in 1963 to farm. He and his two sons own and operate 3R Farms in Anthony. Rudy has served on the Elephant Butte Irrigation District Board since 1987.

Gary Essliner

Drought happens. It is something that we are all going to have to face. Today we have some panelists who have experienced drought, know something about it, and did something about it. They will share with you their recollections of their time in a drought.

When I picked up a dictionary to find out the definition of drought, I found that the word has a whole lot of different meanings. The American Heritage Dictionary defines drought as a long period with no rain, especially during the planting season. But here in the west where we do dry weather planting and we have an abundance of water in our storage, certainly this definition doesn't necessarily hold true. I came up with some other definitions including a few by the U.S. Geological Survey. One definition was for "agricultural drought," and that is a shortage of water in the root zone of plants such that the plant yield is reduced considerably. There also is "hydrologic drought," an extended period during which stream flow, lake and reservoir drought water levels are below normal. There is "meteorological drought," which is an extended period during which precipitation is below normal. And there is "sociological drought" that occurs when meteorological and hydrological conditions are such that less water is available than is anticipated and relied on for the normal level of social or economic activity in a region. Keep in mind that drought is cyclical and affects us all in different ways and we must all deal with it together.

Now I would like to introduce our distinguished panelists, first of whom is Ted Cox. Ted was born in Canutillo, Texas and now lives in New Mexico. He has been married to the same woman and has lived in the same house for 46 years. He is a fourth generation farmer and his family currently operates a 148-acre farm in the Mesilla Valley. Ted is also a successful businessman, and owns and operates a seed business in Anthony. He graduated from Anthony Union High and he studied agriculture and engineering at New Mexico A&M. Today Ted is going to talk to us about his experiences on the farm during the '50s. Second is John Clayshulte, also known as "Tuffy." As I recall my time with Tuffy over the last 21 years, I realize Tuffy is like E.F. Hutton, when he talks, everyone listens. Over the years, he has said so many things that have steered our board in the direction it is in right now. We give him a lot of credit for the philosophies behind the policies of the Elephant Butte Irrigation District's (EBID) board. He is a native of Mesilla. He was born in the Mesilla Valley in 1920 and graduated from Las Cruces High School in 1938 and went on to graduate from New Mexico A&M with a civil engineering degree. He was a member of ROTC, which lead him into the Army Engineering Corp. He served in Europe, returning in 1945. Tuffy is also a bee keeper in the Mesilla Valley and maybe he will share with you what a bee goes through during a drought. He also has a farm with his sons. Tuffy served on the EBID board from 1980 until 1999. His wife Jean is also a native of Mesilla Valley.

Our last panelist was to be Woodrow Gary, and if you have seen the movie, "Toy Story," you'll remember a character named Woody. EBID for many years had quite a character named Woody as well. I'm sorry he is not here today but there has been a death in his family just two days ago and I hope that you all keep him and his family in your prayers.

At the last minute we found a replacement for Woody, and again he is one of our board members, Rudy Provencio. Rudy's heritage in the Mesilla Valley goes back to the 1700s when his family settled there. He studied agronomy and civil engineering at New Mexico State University, graduating as an engineer. He worked for a construction firm in Houston for a while before coming back to the farm in 1963. He and his two sons own and operate a farm called 3R Farms in the Anthony area. Rudy has served on the EBID board since 1987, and is a 12-year veteran with the district. With that, I'll turn it over to Ted and allow him an opportunity to recollect his experiences with drought.

Ted Cox

Thank you Gary. After listening to the gentleman who spoke earlier today giving the releases of water from Elephant Butte over the years, I realized just how much foresight my father had at the time concerning the drilling of wells. We drilled our first irrigation well in 1949 to a depth of 145 feet. A second well was drilled in 1951 at 165 feet. As I recall, we pumped all our water for a five-year period during the '50s.

We were encouraged to transfer any river water that we might have received to our neighbors who weren't fortunate enough to have drilled wells. We had one well that could be pumped into the lateral and we were able to supply some of our neighbors with some of the water they needed.

I don't recall much land having been laid out at the time because the landowners did not have access to enough water. The crops we were growing during that five-year period did change somewhat. Alfalfa virtually disappeared, and I recall seeing quite a bit of barley, which is a very drought resistant crop if you starve it enough.

At the beginning of those pumping years, our static water level stood at 20 feet. After five years of steady pumping, the static water level dropped 12 feet and the drainage ditches in the area dried up. After we started getting river water again, it took three years of irrigation with river water to restore the static water level back to 20 feet, which is where it stands now.

I remember when Elephant Butte overflowed during the early '40s. It was a beautiful sight, but just ten or twelve years later, I visited again and it was just empty. There was so little water that they had moved the boat docks just about right under the dam and you could see the concrete houses that had been built earlier for the construction crews right near the dam. It was scary. My thought was, how long is this drought going to last? My thought ever since is, is this the beginning of another five-year drought? Could this possibly be a ten-year drought, or longer? Hopefully not.

My concern now is that with the increased need for water, groundwater levels could drop. We have shallow wells and as I understand it, El Paso has drilled some wells almost 2,000 feet deep that could pull water away from our wells. Not only that, if they dry up and the drain system stops flowing, you'll see the end of agriculture within the next few years. Another concern we've had is that we haven't drilled wells deep enough. If we run out of well water, we are virtually out of water to supplement surface water. My last comment would be that laser leveling has been a blessing to our area because it has saved us a lot of irrigation water. However, at the same time, we are not putting that much water on our crops so water isn't percolating back into the aquifer. It is a blessing on one hand but it is something we need to be concerned about.

Thank you.

John "Tuffy" Clayshulte

I have to agree with Ted that laser leveling in the valley has helped us cut back tremendously on the water we use.

When I look back, I can remember one year, I'm not sure just exactly what year it was, when we were allowed six inches of water. Pecan trees require 36 inches to four to five feet of water, depending on the kind of soil you have, if you want any quality at all in your crop. Six inches does not go very far.

We all went through quite a struggle in the '50s and each one of us had to do our best with our own problems. But since everybody had the same problems, everybody understood the problems and cooperated almost entirely as best they could–farmers with each other and with the EBID also.

In my case, I had a little farm down at the end of what we called Snake Ditch, about a two-mile ditch that passed 10 or 12 plots of land along that way. These were small plots that didn't have any other water. My brother had a pump right on the California Canal, and the California Canal is the one that terminates at Stahmann's Snow Ranch Farm. The Stahmann's farm is a big farm and they ran a lot of water. With my brother's permission and EBID's, I was able to pump into the California Canal, and run the water about a quarter to a half mile south to where the Snake Ditch began. When I started to irrigate my farm, the people living along the Snake Ditch all wanted some of that water. I cooperated as best I could. We were able to provide water to a lot of little pieces of land that couldn't get water before and I was able to water my 12-acre piece of land at the end of Snake Ditch.

One year I took all the money that I made from my bee business and used it for drilling a good well. The following year, I used that well on a lettuce crop and I had a wonderful field of lettuce. However, it cost $5 a crate to get the lettuce to market and I only got $5 a crate for it so I put a big sign up that said "Help Yourself." Some people did and some others wanted me to carry the lettuce to them!

The most important thing that I did during the time was to cooperate with EBID. With EBID's

permission, I was able to put a pipe across the Mesilla Canal. EBID told me I had to go four feet below the canal with my pipe. That's fairly deep when you start to think about how deep the hole has to be to put a pipe in four feet below the canal. I didn't have very good equipment so it took me about two months of hard labor. I haven't used the pipe in 20 years but it is still available, and I could use it someday.

The way we solved problems in those days was strict cooperation among everybody concerned. Everybody was aware of everybody else's problems. We all tried to help each other, particularly the people that did have wells, and of course wells went in fast in those years. In the early '50s, there practically weren't any wells. I drilled my first well in 1954. The farms I bought after that had wells, thank goodness. Cooperation among people solved our problems back then. If we get into another drought situation, which I'm sure we will sometime, I hope we get the same cooperation among everyone. Thank you.

Rudy Provencio

What I remember most vividly about the drought years was the day and night pumping and the shock of receiving an annual water allotment of two inches when it takes at least 2.5- or 3-acre feet to grow a crop of cotton, which is one of our least water requiring crops. Perhaps most of all are the recollections of the unselfish cooperation that occurred among all of my neighbors. We all understood the importance, the urgency of growing a crop.

If you don't farm one year it's not like taking an unpaid vacation for that year. In the case of farmers, especially our irrigated farms down in southern New Mexico, it would put you out of business. That's because of our high capitalization costs. The land, even at that time was selling for $1,200 an acre. You had a lot of overhead costs that would continue whether you farmed or not. Irrigation water charges, for example, you had regardless of whether or not you received water. There also were property taxes, equipment costs, and so forth. The mortgage on your farm still had to be paid. Having to stay out for a year would put you out of business. We all realized this and the neighbors helped each other.

Not everybody could drill a well because it cost $5,000 at that time to drill a shallow well. Especially if you had a smaller farm, you just couldn't afford it. Neighbors went to ingenious lengths to help each other. You might have a farm or a field that didn't have a well and a neighbor a quarter mile away might have a well and be willing to pump for you. He might route the water into the EBID canal where it would travel a ways to a neighbors field and then that neighbor might make a ditch to cross his farm over to your field. Somehow everybody survived. I don't recall fields being idle either, every field at one time or another received groundwater.

If we come to another drought period, there will be some different conditions. In addition to the agricultural pumping, since the '50s, demands from other sources have grown. There's a lot of domestic pumping now. Cities are pumping a great deal of water that was not being pumped in the '50s. The demand on the groundwater is going to be much greater, draw downs are going to be quicker, shallow wells are going to be put out of business sooner and salts from the irrigation water are going to collect in our groundwater. Another big change is the cost of drilling a well. Even if you could get a permit, and you can only get a permit to replace an existing well, the price has jumped from $5,000, which is what it was in the '50s, to $45,000 for a shallow well and $145,000 for a deep well. That will not be an option for many farmers, especially in these days of low crop prices. I think it is well recognized that crop prices are at historic lows. All I can figure is that it's going to take even more cooperation and unselfishness to get through a drought. I suspect that when it happens, we'll find a way to cooperate.

Thank you.