



THE BUREAU OF RECLAMATION

A Brief History

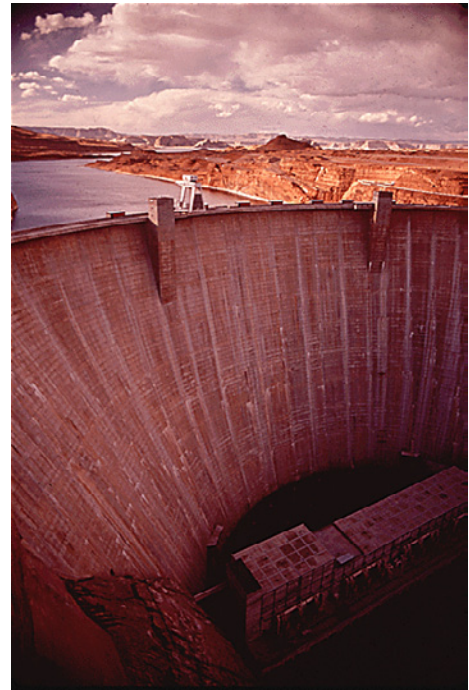
Inadequate precipitation in the American West required settlers to use irrigation for agriculture. At first, settlers simply diverted water from streams, but in many areas demand outstripped supply. As demand for water increased, settlers wanted to store “wasted” runoff from rains and snow for later use, thus maximizing use by making more water available in drier seasons. At that time, private and state-sponsored storage and irrigation ventures were pursued but often failed because of lack of money and/or lack of engineering skill.

Pressure mounted for the Federal Government to undertake storage and irrigation projects. Congress had already invested in America’s infrastructure through subsidies to roads, river navigation, harbors, canals, and railroads. Westerners wanted the Federal Government also to invest in irrigation projects in the West. The irrigation movement demonstrated its strength when pro-irrigation planks found their way into both Democratic and Republican platforms in 1900. Eastern and Midwestern opposition in the Congress quieted when Westerners filibustered and killed a bill containing rivers and harbors projects favored by opponents of Western irrigation. Congress passed the Reclamation Act of June 17, 1902. The Act required that water users repay construction costs from which they received benefits.

In the jargon of that day, irrigation projects were known as “**reclamation**” projects. The concept was that irrigation would “reclaim” arid lands for human use. In addition, “**homemaking**” was a key argument for supporters of reclamation. Irrigation’s supporters believed reclamation programs would encourage Western settlement, making homes for Americans on family farms. President Theodore Roosevelt supported the reclamation movement because of his personal experience in the West, and because he believed in homemaking.

In July of 1902, in accordance with the Reclamation Act, Secretary of the Interior Ethan Allen Hitchcock established the United States Reclamation Service within the U. S. Geological Survey (USGS). The new Reclamation Service studied potential water development projects in each western state with Federal lands — revenue from sale of Federal lands was the initial source of the program’s funding. Because Texas had no Federal lands, it did not become a Reclamation state until 1906 when Congress passed a special Act including it in the provisions of the Reclamation Act.

From 1902 to 1907, Reclamation began about 30 projects in Western states. Then, in 1907, the Secretary of the Interior separated the Reclamation Service from the USGS and created an independent bureau within the Department of the Interior. In the early years, many projects encountered problems: lands/soils included in projects were unsuitable for irrigation ;land speculation sometimes resulted in poor settlement patterns; proposed repayment schedules could not be met by irrigators



*Glen Canyon Dam
circa 1970*

who had high land preparation and facilities construction costs; settlers were inexperienced in irrigation farming; water logging of irrigable lands required expensive drainage projects; and projects were built in areas which could only grow low-value crops. In 1923 the agency was renamed the "Bureau of Reclamation." Then, in the face of increasing settler unrest and financial problems for the reclamation program, in 1924 the "Fact Finder's Report" spotlighted the issues. The Fact Finders Act in late 1924 sought to resolve some of the financial and other problems.

In 1928 Congress authorized the Boulder Canyon (Hoover Dam) Project, and large appropriations began, for the first time, to flow to Reclamation from the general funds of the United States. The authorization came only after a hard fought debate about the pros and cons of public power versus private power.

The heyday of Reclamation construction of water facilities occurred during the Depression and the thirty-five years after World War II. The last major authorization for construction projects occurred in the late 1960s while a parallel evolution and development of the American environmental movement began to result in strong opposition to water development projects. Even the 1976 failure of Teton Dam as it filled for the first time, did not diminish Reclamation's strong international reputation in water development circles. However, this first and only failure of a major Reclamation dam did shake the bureau which subsequently developed a very strong dam safety program designed to avoid similar problems in the future. However, the failure of Teton Dam, the environmental movement, and the announcement of the President Jimmy Carter's "hit list" on water projects profoundly affected the direction of Reclamation's programs and activities in the United States.

Reclamation operates about 180 projects in the 17 Western States. The total Reclamation investment for completed project facilities in September of 1992 was about \$11.0 billion. Reclamation projects provide agricultural, household, and industrial water to about one-third of the population of the American West. About 5 percent of the land area of the West is irrigated, and Reclamation provides water to about one-fifth of that acreage (in 1992, some 9,120,000 acres). Reclamation is a major American generator of electricity. In 1993 Reclamation had 56 power plants on-line and generated 34.7 billion kilowatt hours of electricity.

Between 1988 and 1994, Reclamation underwent major reorganization as construction on projects authorized in the 1960s and earlier drew to an end. Reclamation wrote that "The arid West essentially has been reclaimed. The major rivers have been harnessed and facilities are in place or are being completed to meet the most pressing current water demands and those of the immediate future." Emphasis in Reclamation programs shifted from construction to operation and maintenance of existing facilities. Reclamation's redefined official mission is to "manage, develop, and protect water and related resources in an environmentally and economically sound manner in the interest of the American public." In redirecting its programs and responsibilities, Reclamation substantially reduced its staff levels and budgets but remains a significant Federal agency in the West.



*Surveyors
circa 1930*