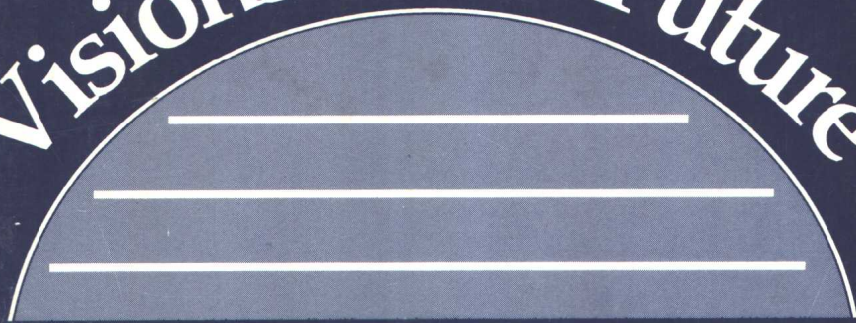


# Visions of the Future



PROCEEDINGS  
OF THE  
THIRD NATIONAL  
IRRIGATION SYMPOSIUM

OCTOBER 28 - NOVEMBER 1,  
1990  
PHOENIX CIVIC PLAZA  
PHOENIX, ARIZONA



American Society of  
Agricultural Engineers

# **VISIONS OF THE FUTURE**

**Proceedings of the  
Third National Irrigation Symposium  
held in conjunction with the  
11th Annual International  
Irrigation Exposition**

**(October 28 - November 1, 1990)**

**Phoenix Civic Plaza  
Phoenix, Arizona**

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## Preface

The 3rd National Irrigation Symposium is convened with the goals of summarizing current irrigation practice and focusing attention on the future of both irrigation research and technology for the next ten years as we prepare for the 21st century. This is the first National Irrigation Symposium to be held in conjunction with the Irrigation Association's Annual International Exposition.

Both the 1st and 2nd National Irrigation Symposiums were held in Lincoln, Nebraska with fewer papers presented (43 in 1970 and 26 in 1980) and included in the Symposium Proceedings. In 1980, the Symposium Proceedings were augmented by the concurrent publication of the ASAE monograph "Design and Operation of Farm Irrigation Systems." During, or shortly after, the 1990 Symposium, ASAE will publish a sequel to the previous monograph entitled "Management of Farm Irrigation Systems."

The 3rd National Irrigation Symposium is being held in the irrigated west, where much of the industry and the irrigated area of our country is concentrated. Phoenix, Arizona provides excellent convention facilities which can accommodate both the technical sessions and the International Irrigation Exposition.

The scope of the 1990 Symposium has been expanded to include concurrent sessions and one-on-one (poster) presentations. A call for papers attracted many authors interested in presenting papers at, and participating in, the Symposium. The inclusion of one-on-one presentations in the Exposition exhibit area is also a first for the Irrigation Association.

The joint sponsorship by ASAE and IA fosters greater interaction between the irrigation industry and the irrigation researchers and educators. We believe this forum will enhance the stature and impact of both groups, and encourage greater cooperation in solving the problems of the 21st century.

Dale F. Heermann and Kenneth H. Solomon Co-Chairs  
1990 International Irrigation Exposition and  
3rd National Irrigation Symposium

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# Table of Contents

21	Preface .....	x	(22)
21	Sponsors and Committees .....	xi	(22)
<b>CHANGES IN IRRIGATION</b>			
21	Irrigation in the USA: Musings on a Rapidly Changing Scene .....	1	(22)
	J. van Schilfgaarde		
	The Changing Economics of Agricultural Water Use.....	8	
	H. J. Vaux, Jr.		
<b>NEW RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT IN SURFACE IRRIGATION</b>			
	A Volume Balance Model for a Real Time Automated Furrow Irrigation System.....	13	
	E. A. Latimer and D. L. Reddell		
	Cablegation: A Review of the Past Decade and Prospects for the Next .....	21	
	T. J. Trout, D. C. Kincaid, and W. D. Kemper		
	Semiautomation of Basin and Border Irrigation .....	28	
	A. S. Humpherys		
	Level-Basin Irrigation — An Update.....	34	
	A. R. Dedrick		
	Summary of Irrigation Practices within the Pinal Active Management Area, Central Arizona.....	40	
	B. A. Ekholt and R. D. Jones		
<b>MANAGEMENT PRACTICES TO CONSERVE WATER</b>			
	Reservoir-Tillage and Controlled-Traffic Practices on Irrigated Crops in Humid Regions .....	47	
	S. G. Hackwell, E. W. Rochester, and K. H. Yoo		
	Low Pressure Center Pivot Irrigation and Reservoir Tillage .....	54	
	D. C. Kincaid, I. McCann, J. R. Busch, and M. Hasheminia		
	Irrigation Management Service's Role in Improving Irrigation Water Use in Arizona .....	61	
	C. A. Haynes and B. A. Ekholt		
	AGWATER - Irrigation Management and Planning Expert System .....	64	
	T. Hawkins and C. M. Burt		
	Sprinkler Efficiency Measurement with Large Weighing Lysimeters .....	69	
	A. D. Schneider and T. A. Howell		
<b>MANAGEMENT OF TURF AND LANDSCAPE IRRIGATION</b>			
	Efficient Turf Water Management: A Step by Step Approach.....	77	
	G. Kah		
	Turfgrass Irrigation Scheduling and Quality with Soil Moisture Sensors .....	82	
	G. L. Horst and J. Peterson		
	Sub-Surface Drip Irrigation of Turfgrass .....	88	
	R. S. Rauschkolb, J. Klingenberg, T. Scherer, and D. Morris		
	Determination of the Spatial and Temporal Distribution of Normalized Irrigation Intervals.....	90	
	F. S. Zazueta, A. G. Smajstrla, and G. A. Clark		
	Software for Turfgrass Water Audits .....	96	
	R. L. Snyder		

## **RESEARCH NEEDS IN IRRIGATION**

Irrigation Research — Challenges for the 21st Century .....	101
D. A. Bucks	
Turfgrass Water Conservation in the Arid Southwest.....	107
R. L. Morris	

## **NEW RESEARCH & DEVELOPMENT IN SPRINKLER/LEPA IRRIGATION SYSTEMS**

Irrigation System Design for Multiple Cropping Operations.....	108
W. M. Lyle and J. P. Bordovsky	
Managing Wastewater/Land Application by Computerized Remote Monitor Control .....	114
H. D. Howard, R. E. Poppe, and R. R. Unruh	
Six Years of LEPA in Texas - Less Water, Higher Yields .....	115
G. Fipps and L. L. New	
Constant Hole Spacing Trail Tubes.....	121
S. T. Chu	
Center Pivot Corner Irrigation Performance with Pressure Regulators .....	127
W. L. Trimmer and H. R. Duke	

## **IRRIGATION MANAGEMENT AND PLANT GROWTH**

Infiltration Uniformity Effects on Cotton Yields and Potential Economic Returns .....	134
J. D. Oster and D. Wichelns	
Evapotranspiration of Irrigated Grain Sorghum and Corn -Southern High Plains .....	140
T. A. Howell, J. L. Steiner, and A. D. Schneider	
Distribution of Annual Weeds in Relation to Irrigation Method.....	148
S. R. Grattan, L. J. Schwankl, and W. T. Lanini	
Water Requirements of Vitis Vinifera Grapes .....	154
R. G. Evans, S. E. Spayd, R. L. Wample, and M. W. Kroeger	
Uncertainty in a Malting Barley Management Expert System .....	162
J. P. King and I. Broner	

## **IRRIGATION SCHEDULING OF TURF**

Blue Grass Lawns: Basic Principles of Watering.....	168
R. E. Jeffries	
Electrical Resistance Measurement of Soil Water for Controlling Landscape Irrigation .....	170
W. R. Pogue	
Scheduling Turf Irrigation Controllers Based on Precipitation Rates and Water Use .....	176
B. E. Vinchesi and B. E. Lynch	
Developing Crop Coefficients for Desert Turfgrass - Calibrating Reference ET with Turf Water Use.....	181
D. M. Kopec, P. W. Brown, C. F. Mancino, and D. C. Slack	
Xeriscape: Fad, Fiction or State-of-the-Art.....	186
D. F. Welsh	

## **THE FUTURE OF IRRIGATION TECHNOLOGY**

A Global View of the Future Development of Irrigated Agriculture.....	187
G. V. Skogerboe	
The Future of Landscape Irrigation Consulting .....	193
G. A. Hurst	

<b>NEW RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT IN MICRO IRRIGATION SYSTEMS</b>	
Performance of "Turbo Model" Drip Irrigation Tubes .....	198
W. Bui	
Evaluation of a Dual Level Subirrigation System.....	204
S. W. Melvin, R. S. Kanwar, and D. G. Baker	
Root Intrusion Protection of Buried Drip Irrigation Devices with Slow-Release Herbicides.....	211
R. Ruskin, P. Van Voris, and D. A. Cataldo	
Drip Line Spacing and Plant Population for Corn .....	217
W. E. Spurgeon and H. L. Manges	
The Drip Irrigation Revolution in the Hawaiian Sugarcane Industry .....	223
R. C. Moore and J. C. Fitschen	
<b>SOIL EFFECTS ON IRRIGATION MANAGEMENT</b>	
Estimating Furrow Intake.....	228
B. R. Hanson, T. L. Prichard, and H. Schulbach	
Furrow Diking - Irrigation Energy Conservation in the Southeastern U.S. ....	233
J. C. Hayes, C. V. Privette, and K. F. Holbrook	
Design of Conjunctive Irrigation and Drainage Systems.....	239
L. A. Garcia, K. M. Strzepek, and T. H. Podmore	
Drip Irrigation Emitter Depth Placement in a Slowly Permeable Soil .....	248
D. W. Grimes, D. S. Munk, and D. A. Goldhamer	
Feedback Control for Surface Irrigation Management .....	255
A. J. Clemmens	
<b>IRRIGATION SCHEDULING</b>	
Washington Public Agriculture Weather System .....	261
T. W. Ley and R. G. Evans	
Implementing CIMIS at the Farm Level: A Grower's Experience in Walnuts.....	270
A. E. Fulton, R. H. Beede, and R. C. Phene	
Scheduling Irrigation for Cotton in Humid Areas.....	275
C. R. Camp, W. M. Thomas, and C. C. Green	
Irrigation Scheduling Using the Crop Water Stress Index in Arizona.....	281
D. J. Garrot, Jr., D. D. Fangmeier, S. H. Husman, M. W. Kilby, M. J. Ottman, D. T. Ray, S. W. Stedman, and J. M. Harper	
Comparison of Three Irrigation Scheduling Methods in the Arid Southwestern U.S.....	287
T. F. Scherer, D. C. Slack, L. Clark, and F. Fox	
<b>IRRIGATION OF TURF</b>	
Electrical Wiring and Safety Requirements for Turf Irrigation .....	292
L. E. Stetson	
Standards for Turf and Landscape Irrigation Systems .....	300
B. R. McMahon, A. G. Smajstrla, and F. L. McGee	
Landscape Irrigation Scheduling and Centralized Control .....	304
S. W. Smith	
Cross-Connection Requirements for Turf Irrigation.....	310
P. H. Schwartz	
Drip Irrigation in Landscaping.....	315
S. Tobey	

<b>IRRIGATION AND SOCIETY</b>	
Irrigation Policy by Non-Agriculturalists .....	322
R. E. Moore and J. D. Downing	
Water, People and Politics .....	330
L. T. Wallace	
<b>DESIGN OF IRRIGATION SYSTEMS</b>	
Wind Considerations in Sprinkler System Design .....	334
R. D. von Bernuth and I. Seginer	
An Expert System for the Hydraulic Design of Microirrigation Systems .....	340
V. F. Bralts, W. H. Shayya, M. A. Driscoll, and L. Cao	
A Simple Computerized Drip Irrigation Design .....	348
J. Feng and I. P. Wu	
Irrigation Via Watertable Control .....	354
J. L. Fouss, R. W. Skaggs, and J. E. Ayars	
Soil Consolidation in Surge Flow Irrigation .....	361
H. R. Jalali-Farahani, H. R. Duke, and D. F. Heermann	
<b>IRRIGATION WITH SALINE AND/OR LOW QUALITY WATER</b>	
Long Term Use of Saline Water for Irrigation .....	368
J. E. Ayars, R. B. Huttmacher, R. A. Schoneman, and S. S. Vail	
Mechanical and Chemical Practices for Reducing Salinity in Pecan Orchards .....	374
S. G. Helmers and S. Miyamoto	
Salt Resistance of Pistachio .....	378
G. A. Picchioni, J. B. Storey, and S. Miyamoto	
A Model to Estimate Salt Accumulation and Crop Yields in Surface-Irrigated Orchards .....	384
S. Miyamoto	
Soil and Water Quality Considerations Affecting Irrigation Water Duties in Central Arizona .....	390
T. G. Carr, R. L. Edmond, and H. D. Galusha	
<b>FUTURE IRRIGATION STRATEGIES</b>	
Irrigation Management for Groundwater Quality Protection .....	395
H. Bouwer	
Future Irrigation Strategies .....	400
V. Nollelli	
Runoff Farming: Irrigation Technology of the Future .....	404
G. W. Frasier	
Water and Energy Conservation by Improving Irrigation Practices in Colorado .....	410
I. Broner and F. R. Leibrock	
The Center for Irrigation Technology: Beyond the First Decade .....	416
K. H. Solomon, D. F. Zoldoske, and G. S. Jorgensen	
<b>SENSORS IN IRRIGATION</b>	
Sensing Soil Salinity: New Technology .....	422
J. D. Rhoades	
Sensing Irrigation Needs .....	429
C. J. Phene, B. Itier, and R. J. Reginato	

## **CHEMIGATION**

Comparative Nitrogen Application Methods for Tart Cherry Trees in Michigan.....	444
R. Mohtar, V. F. Bralts, C. D. Kesner, and W. M. Klein	
Chemigation with LEPA Center Pivots.....	453
L. New, A. Knutson, and G. Fipps	
Solute Leaching Due to Chemigation .....	459
G. D. Jennings and D. L. Martin	
Pestigation in Trickle Irrigation .....	464
M. R. Goyal, J. Roman, R. M. Zapata, and F. Gallardo	
The Use of Type 304 Stainless Steel for Construction of Sand Media Filters for Agricultural Irrigation -A Six Year Study .....	469
J. J. Rector	

## **OPERATION AND MAINTENANCE OF IRRIGATION SYSTEMS**

Energy Savings with Filtration.....	475
J. P. Canales and R. D. Delenikos	
Maintenance Characteristics of Microirrigation Emitters .....	481
B. J. Boman	
Improved Local Automatic Control for Scheduled Deliveries .....	487
J. M. Reddy	
Irrigation District Canal Automation - CARDD .....	495
C. M. Burt	

## **CROP PRODUCTION AND IRRIGATION ECONOMICS**

Irrigation Design Options and Water Management for Pecans .....	501
J. C. Henggeler	
Asparagus Response to Water, Nitrogen and Temperature .....	507
R. L. Roth and B. R. Gardner	
Seed Alfalfa Irrigation Management: Crop Water Use, Plant Water Status and Seed Yields.....	513
R. B. Hutmacher, J. J. Steiner, J. E. Ayars, S. S. Vail, and S. Gamble	
Multi-Objective On-Farm Irrigation System Planning Incorporating Risk and Resource Constraints .....	519
B. A. King and J. R. Busch	

## **ONE-ON-ONE PRESENTATIONS**

Menu-Driven Design Program for Long Throated Flumes.....	527
A. J. Clemmens, M. G. Bos, and J. M. Groenestein	
Automated Irrigation Systems Using Plant and Soil Sensors .....	533
D. D. Fangmeier, D. J. Garrot, Jr., C. F. Mancino, and S. H. Husman	
Automated and Manual Layflat Tubing for Irrigation and Conveyance.....	538
A. S. Humpherys and E. Oest	
Irrigation Central Control Via Radio: The Next Generation.....	545
D. Megeath	
Applicator Selection Along Center Pivots Using Soil Infiltration Parameters .....	549
R. G. Allen	
A Simplified Computer Aided Trickle Irrigation Design and Components Specification Model .....	556
J. W. Baier and R. C. Warner	
Center Pivot Design and Evaluation .....	564
D. F. Heermann	
Sprinkler Spacing Designs: From Rules of Thumb to Computer Analysis .....	571
D. F. Zoldoske, J. C. Oliphant, and K. H. Solomon	

Undertree Sprinkler Systems for Frost Protection .....	577
R. D. von Bernuth	
✓ Infrared Telemetry and Tensiometers - A Closed Loop Irrigation Management Tool.....	583
L. Feuer	
Trouble Shooting in Trickle Irrigation .....	589
M. R. Goyal	
Decision Support System for Improved Irrigation Management .....	594
G. J. Wilmes, D. L. Martin, and R. J. Supalla	
Weather Station Networking for Multiple Applications in Southeast Missouri .....	601
V. Ayers, S. Honeycutt, and B. Kelly	
Computer-Based Irrigation Scheduling Method for Humid Areas .....	606
C. R. Camp, E. J. Sadler, and T. P. Harvey	
Surface Irrigation Scheduling Technology .....	612
G. V. Skogerboe and M. S. Shafique	
Irrigation Practices in a High Rainfall Area: Effect of Irrigation on Soil Moisture Changes .....	618
K. S. Yoon, K. H. Yoo, T. W. Tyson, and L. M. Curtis	
A Continued Salt Tolerance Study of Mature Plum Trees .....	625
R. M. Mead, G. J. Hoffman, P. B. Catlin, R. S. Johnson, and L. E. Francois	
Irrigation Efficiencies in an Irrigation District with Drainage Disposal Problems.....	631
R. A. Schoneman, J. E. Ayars, and K. Peterson	
Irrigation Scheduling of Woody Landscape Plants Based on Foliage Temperature ...	635
R. K. Kjelgren	
Soybean Response to Johnsongrass Competition, Irrigation Levels and Soil Types..	641
G. A. Gayle, M. R. Reddy, and C. R. Burrell	
Drip Irrigation Management Book (Spanish).....	651
M. R. Goyal	
Irrigation Pump Efficiency Audit.....	654
C. V. Privette, A. Reyes, and A. E. Jones	
Subsurface Irrigation Trial for Alfalfa in Hawaii.....	658
W. Bui and R. V. Osgood	
A Process for Improving the Performance of Irrigated Agriculture .....	661
A. R. Dedrick, W. Clyma, and J. D. Palmer	
Feedback Control of Cablegation Systems .....	667
M. Humphries and T. J. Trout	
Irrigation Water Management by the State of Maryland with Emphasis on Golf Course Use .....	675
P. A. Hammond and K. H. McKinney	
Orchard Vegetation Management: Effects Upon Water Use and Soil Characteristics.....	681
T. L. Prichard, W. K. Asai, and L. C. Hendricks	
Drip Irrigation Burial Depth and Seed Planting Depth Effects on Tomato Germination .....	682
L. J. Schwankl, S. R. Grattan, and E. M. Miyao	
Scheduling Irrigation in the Southeast with Minimum Inputs .....	688
T. W. Tyson and L. M. Curtis	
Prediction of Albedo for Use in Evapotranspiration and Irrigation Scheduling .....	692
M. J. Dvoracek and B. Hannabas	
Irrigation Scheduling: A Statewide Program in Michigan.....	700
E. C. Martin, W. H. Shayya, V. F. Bralts, T. L. Loudon, and J. A. Johnson	
Economic Procedures for Determining Irrigation Water Duties in Central Arizona ..	707
T. G. Carr, R. L. Edmond, and S. Stipe	

Economies of Size of Small Hard Hose Travelers —	
Power and Energy Requirements .....	713
E. W. Rochester and S. G. Hackwell	
Evaluation of LEPA on Center Pivot Machines .....	720
G. W. Buchleiter	
Evaluation and Comparison of Crop Water Stress Index	
Models for Irrigation Scheduling of Bermuda Grass Turf .....	725
D. C. Slack, D. M. Kopec, P. W. Brown, A. D. Matthias, and H. R. Jalali-Farahani	
Percolation Improvement of Pressurized Irrigation Water	
Using Catalytic Water Conditioners.....	731
J. A. McCaskill	
Performance Evaluation of a Perforated Pipe Sprinkler Irrigation System .....	738
P. K. Kalita, R. S. Kanwar, and M. P. Kaushal	
Butterfly Control Valve Applications in Closed-Pipe Farm Deliveries .....	744
R. D. S. Khalsa and S. J. Robertson	
Field Techniques to Evaluate Surface Irrigation Systems	
with Relevance to Developing Nations.....	750
B. A. Ekholt	
Author Index .....	757
Subject Index.....	759

## IRRIGATION IN THE USA:

### Musings on a rapidly changing scene

Jan van Schilfgaarde\*  
Member ASAE

Water, both literally and poetically, is the life blood of civilization (Schwenk and Schwenk 1989). From its beginning, the fate of civilizations has been tied to water and its management. As Helen Ingram points out, regional development, shifts in population, the growth of trade, and the ebb and flow of cultural influence have all depended in important ways on water transportation routes, sophisticated irrigation works, and uncontaminated supplies for consumption (Ingram et al 1986).

This dependence is well known; as an example, recall Mesopotamia, the land between the Tigris and Euphrates. At the height of the Sumerian Empire, about 4000 years ago, the region depended on a highly developed irrigation system. Erosion and sedimentation, as well as salination, went hand-in-hand with the collapse of the empire. As an early indication of the interaction between environment and water management, it seems that Bilharziasis, spread by fresh-water snails, created a serious public health problem (Ency. Brit.)

Closer to home, we may recall the Hohokam civilization in the Southwest.

Water, of course, is essential for much more than irrigation, but irrigation is indeed the largest user and, worldwide, irrigation plays a major part in food production. In the United States, about 25% of the value of agricultural production is grown on some 10% of the land by irrigation.

It is interesting also to trace the development of the United States in relation to water. Drainage work started in the latter half of the 18th century, especially in the Southeast. The beginning of subsurface on-farm drainage in this country is generally dated at 1835. Beginning in the mid-19th century, one sees a drive to "conquer the swamps", as settlers moved West from the Eastern seaboard (van Schilfgaarde 1987).

Drainage, or water management, was an integral part of the Nation's "developmental ethos". Development of the land was seldom easy or cost-free, but yet there was a consensus that it was right.

In the West, a parallel yet different scenario unfolded. The Reclamation Act of 1902, which established the Bureau of Reclamation, was intended to help develop the West by fostering irrigated family farms. In recognition of the fact that private enterprise was hard-pressed to develop the water resources over large distances, Federal financing was called for. Thus here the rugged individualism and strong entrepreneurship we associate with development was tempered (or contaminated?) by Federal involvement. Just as in North Carolina, Indiana and Iowa swamps were converted into productive farmland, so in the West the desert was transformed.

In many ways, the Reclamation Act was a great success. Today, some 20% of the area irrigated in the West receives Reclamation water, or 4 million

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hectares. Its influence in developing the West no doubt has been substantially greater than that figure indicates. Yet, as one reads about the history of water development, one realizes that neither the motives, nor the outcome, were as pure—or as clear-cut—as is often thought (Worster, 1985). The lofty objective ("go West, young man") of providing opportunities for development and establishing family farms was mixed with the desire to get rid of the riffraff in Eastern cities, or to develop markets for eastern railroads, or simply to diffuse socio-economic problems in the East. It also failed to recognize the intricate infrastructure required to successfully manage a large irrigation enterprise; thus the tendency towards a concentration of power and of wealth into a few hands. Consequently, the infamous "160-acre limitation" was routinely circumvented and, rather than an equitable distribution of benefits through the establishment of family farms, there often resulted a severely unbalanced distribution of beneficiaries. Goodall and Sullivan (1985) discovered, in comparing two of the largest Bureau of Reclamation projects with nearby non-Federal irrigation development, that income distribution was severely skewed: in the area with Federal water, the level of unemployment was high, as were numbers of poor families; total wealth was substantial but concentrated in a few landowners. In non-Federal areas, the range of family income was narrow, poverty was limited to a few families and social infrastructure—churches, clubs, etc.—healthy and thriving.

Warts and all, the "developmental ethos" succeeded in fostering a very substantial expansion of the irrigated area in the West and, concomitant therewith, widespread economic development. However, new forces have come into play that I shall label the "environmental ethic".

A substantial number of people have looked at what has happened to their surroundings and have become concerned. Not only is Rachel Carson's message being heard after many years; not only have the rural citizens of Iowa decided that they don't like nitrates in their drinking water; also, farmers and non-farmers alike are concerned that California has lost 90-plus % of its wetlands to development, causing severe distress to migratory birds; Coloradans are averse to damming yet another stream to provide unlimited water to profligate unmetered households in Denver; and recreationists are upset that one can no longer find any wild rivers.

Many see irrigation as the culprit, supposedly usurping or misusing the precious water that they would rather put to a different use. Of course, besides true environmental concerns, there is plain, unvarnished competition. Demand often exceeds supply, at least at the price one can afford to pay.

The question no longer concerns just water quantity, but explicitly and decisively, also water quality. Let us illustrate the issue by sketching briefly an example from California.

It has long been known that irrigation in arid climates cannot be long maintained without drainage, be it natural or man-induced. As early as 1886, E. W. Hilgard asserted that even California was not in a position to waive the laws of physics and would have to provide drainage if salination of the Central Valley was to be avoided (Hilgard, 1886). Providing adequate drainage (leaching, if you prefer) to assure that the salt concentration in the soil solution does not exceed the level that can be tolerated by crop roots, is a requirement for continued productivity. This in turn requires, generally, export of salts and thus calls for a disposal mechanism. Until relatively recently, the emphasis (in research and practice) was on removal—or in-situ soil maintenance—with relatively less emphasis on the method of disposal. As illustrated by the Colorado