

Rep. Hunter Backs Water Scarcity, Not Solutions

by Marcia Merry Baker

One of the long-time U.S. Congressmen from the U.S.-Mexico border region, prominent for promoting water scarcity, in effect, by opposing new water infrastructure, is Republican Rep. Duncan Hunter of Southern California. Hunter has represented the 52nd C.D. since 1981. Until 2001, his district included the Imperial Valley Irrigation District—the world famous high-tech farming region in the desert—as well as part of San Diego County, a leading urban center in a water-short region.

Re-districting after the 2000 Census took the Imperial Valley out of Hunter's San Diego C.D. But, simply by location, Hunter has all along been in a catbird seat for formulating Federal water policy—regionally and nationally—from which position he has consistently acted against the public interest in developing new water supplies; he has strenuously advocated “sharing scarcity.”

Hunter's terminology for this is, “water transfers.” By the term, he refers *not* to continental-scale inter-basin transfers of ample water to wherever needed, nor to transfers of high-tech desalinated seawater to inland users. Instead, he means transferring limited amounts from one water-short group of users to another. Hunter's policy is the very western water policy decreed, as of the 1970s, by synarchist financial interests; most prominently by the Federal Reserve.

For example, a 1979 Symposium held by the Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City, “Western Water Resources: Coming Problems and the Policy Alternatives,” denounced the very idea of large-scale inter-basin transfers of water. In particular, “colossal concepts such as NAWAPA will not be practicable,” decreed the bankers. In place of new water supplies, they proposed deregulated “water markets,” to price and sell local transfers of water already in use. In October 1992, a new Federal water market law gave permission to deregulate California's Central Valley Project—the largest Federal water program in the United States—and to create a new “water market.”

Shrinking Imperial Valley

An attorney, Hunter has applied himself to legalistic arrangements to facilitate the new major Southern California water transfer—shifting significant amounts of the Lower Colorado River flow in California, from farm use in the Imperial Valley, to urban use in San Diego County, whose residents



Long-time Southern California Republican Congressman Duncan Hunter has sponsored no new water-supply infrastructure, but encouraged local agreements to transfer scarce water, such as the process by which the very productive Imperial Valley is now giving up some irrigated farmland for San Diego County's town water supplies.

are among 16 million covered by the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California. The San Diego-Imperial Valley deal is the largest such transfer of water in the nation's history.

Hunter himself described this trade-off process, in his December 2001 “Thank you, Imperial Valley ” good-bye speech to former constituents: “As you know, the Imperial Irrigation District has brokered an agreement with other Southern California water agencies to send Colorado River water to urban areas. I have been working closely with these officials on this very complex program. Water is central to the future of Imperial Valley and it is important that our farmers hold on to their water rights. . . . Allowing precious farm land to remain idle for conservation purposes [that is, out-of-production because of absence of water] can become a very slippery slope. I am hopeful, however, that the final agreement will contain the necessary assurances for the Valley and serve as a model for future water transfers throughout the nation.”

If Hunter's policy does prevail as a precedent, the physical economy is doomed. Today, three years after Hunter's “national model” speech, the agreement is indeed being implemented, under a Federal court order, and Imperial Valley land is beginning to lie fallow. Potentially, some 1.5 million acre-feet of water a year—enough for 3 million households—may be transferred, especially under conditions of the persistence of today's 6-7 year drought in the Colorado Basin. Earlier this year, Imperial Valley farmers signed up for how much land they will fallow between July 1, 2004 and July 1, 2005, to free up water.



The 80-mile All-American Canal, looking from the overflow section of the Imperial Dam on the Colorado River. These waterworks were built during FDR's New Deal. The Canal, completed in 1940, began carrying water in 1942, to eventually irrigate some 500,000 acres in the Imperial Valley, through a system of 2,900 miles of laterals. Ditches carry off surplus water to the Alamo River. The Imperial Dam, completed in 1938, was the second on the Colorado, after the Hoover Dam. The Canal is among water and power installations run by the Imperial Irrigation District, set up in 1911 to administer power and water to a service area today covering 6,471 square miles in the Valley.

What He Did and Did Not Do

Hunter's particular focus has been to fend off potential environmentalist objections to the water transfer, which cite the prospect that, without water flowing in the farm region, various environmental degradations will ensue—fish, birds, and other parts of the ecology might die, dust storms arise, etc. Hunter did not want the eco-lobby to then turn around and sue the Imperial Irrigation District, or make the Irrigation District responsible for protecting one fragile eco-feature in particular, the Salton Sea. Hunter introduced H.R. 2764, which called for Federal actions to provide \$60 million worth of habitat-enhancement for the region affected, especially in and around the Salton Sea, and near the All-American Canal.

Hunter's bill was called by its backers, "risk" insurance. The Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, which serves San Diego County and five other counties, encompassing 16 million people, endorsed Hunter's bill as paving the way for water transfer.

On Sept. 24, 2004, Interior Secretary Gale Norton signed an agreement promising \$625 million over the next 50 years to protect rare wildlife, fish, and other creatures, for some 300 miles along the Colorado River, from Lake Mead to Mexico. Half the money is to come from the Federal government, the rest from local and state water agencies along the way, from Nevada, Arizona, and Southern California.

Hunter lobbied intensively for this kind of action, at the same time attacking Norton for her threat to reduce the

amount of the Colorado River flow that California is permitted to take. But this and similar threats were used by the Bush Administration to demand that California farm and town water users reach a speedy agreement on sharing scarce water supplies—Hunter's strategy! Overall, California has been using some 5.2 million acre-feet a year of Colorado River water in recent times, instead of its legal entitlement of 4.4 million, in a long-standing seven-state river-use compact. In January 2003, Norton called for an 11% reduction in the 5.2 million acre-feet California uses. In turn, a lawsuit against the Interior Department was filed by an Imperial Valley water board. After many more actions and counter actions, now the water transfer agreements have been reached.

Representative Hunter never disagreed with the Administration that "sharing scarcity" is the only way to go. He objected only to the deal being rushed and bullied. In January 2003, he wrote a two-page letter to Norton, signed by a bipartisan group of 21 other California Congressmen, saying, "The Federal government's contribution . . . during the past several months has been limited mainly to the issuance of threats and provocations that have impeded, rather than encouraged agreements among Southern California water agencies."

Hunter also faulted the Federal government for not implementing the Salton Sea Reclamation Act of 1998, so that his water transfer schemes could go through without complaints about harm to the Salton Sea. He issued repeated appeals. On Dec. 19, 2002, he said that if the Interior Department would only issue a Salton Sea restoration plan, "This will allow California and the affected local [water] agencies to make informed choices about the impacts and costs of long-term water transfers."

Manufacturing New Water

In fact, no transfers would be necessary at all right now, if Hunter had not acquiesced to the cancellation of proposals entertained by the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, for large-scale nuclear-powered desalination in his very own district. San Diego County is home to 2.8 million people, but without external water sources, the County could sustain only an estimated 50,000 residents. The obvious solution for new water sources is to turn to the Pacific, not to rob the Imperial Valley.

In the 1980s, the California-based General Atomics Corp. was commissioned to provide proposals for advanced nuclear-powered desalting, to the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, of which the San Diego Water District is a part. The fourth-generation nuclear design was called the MHTGR (Modular High-Temperature Gas-Cooled Reactor), which specifies underground reactor construction. Specifics were supplied in a December 1988 report, "MHTGR Desali-



Representative Hunter did not back high-technology desalination of seawater, when the Southern California Metropolitan District planned it; the project died. The process, powered by a high-temperature gas-cooled nuclear plant, could produce half San Diego's water supply from one complex.

nation for Southern California,” through a U.S. Department of Energy contract to General Atomics, Bechtel, Inc., and Gas-Cooled Reactor Associates.

As designed in the 1980s, each de-salting plant would consist of four modular nuclear reactor modules (350 megawatts each), using helium gas as coolant. The low-temperature heat output would fuel eight seawater desalination “trains,” based on the horizontal-tube, multiple-effect distillation process.

One such complex would yield 401,500 cubic meters per day of freshwater, enough to supply 1.5 million people—half of San Diego County—with sufficient potable water for domestic use. Ramp this up, with 10 or more such plants, and the equivalent of a new “man-made river” worth of water could begin to supply all of Southern California’s domestic water needs.

Not backed by Representative Hunter, these plans were tabled. Instead, California is now suffering his “transfers, choices, and options” to share scarce water.