

## Colorado Cattlemen's Ag Water NetWORK Provides Assistance to Ag Water Right Holders

CCA CattleGuard, March 2017

By Phil Brink, Ag Water NetWORK Consulting Coordinator

In 1859, pioneer David K. Wall, farmed a two-acre tract of land in what is now the town of Golden, "which he irrigated by direct flow from one of the small tributaries of Clear Creek. His experiment proved so successful that he increased his irrigated area to eight acres the following year. Again he was very successful and the story of his success spread rapidly." This succinct recounting of the early days of irrigated agriculture in Colorado can be found in the *1922 Year Book of Colorado*. By 1922, the Year Book reported that "completed irrigation enterprises in this state at present are capable of watering approximately 3,900,000 acres." Quite a success story. At that same time - about one century ago - our state had 940,000 residents according the U.S. Census Bureau. For every Colorado resident, there were four acres that could be irrigated!

As often happens, the success of farmers enabled the success of towns and cities. Today, there are nearly 5.5 million people residing in Colorado but farm land under irrigation has declined to about 2.6 million acres. Now, for every Colorado resident, less than ½ acre of farm land is irrigated.

The popularity of our state has not diminished, and the Colorado Water Plan estimates that nearly 10 million people could be residing in Colorado by 2050. The water plan estimates the increased demand for water could result in the loss of as much as one-fourth of Colorado's remaining irrigated agricultural land through the purchase and transfer of water rights from agriculture to urban areas. Such large-scale dry-up of irrigated agriculture would have permanent adverse economic, environmental, cultural and food security impacts.

How can we minimize the permanent loss of irrigated agricultural land and still accommodate one of the highest population growth rates in the U.S.?

Colorado's water plan recommends increased water conservation and storage as the primary means of meeting future water demands. It also sets a goal of 50,000 acre-feet of ag water to be leased to the municipal and industrial sectors on an annual basis. Ag water leasing enables producers to voluntarily lease a portion of their irrigation water for other uses, including municipal, industrial, recreational and to support aquatic life. Through leasing, ag water right holders maintain ownership of their water and land, but receive compensation for the water leased.



Burlap-asphalt ditch lining being installed at CSU's Research Farm, Summer, 1959. CSU Archives. Photo by Ivan Wood.

In late 2015, Colorado Cattlemen's Association established the Ag Water NetWORK to provide information and technical assistance to ag producers about ag water rights and options for responding to the increasing demand for water. The goal of the Ag Water Network is to help *'keep ag water connected with ag land.'*

In 2016, the Ag Water NetWORK conducted the first statewide survey of ag water right holders to better understand their opinions and concerns related to ag water leasing. Results of the survey have been presented at several forums around the state, including workshops organized by the Colorado Ag Water Alliance (CAWA). A final report was also published and is available along with other resources on the CCA website.

We are pleased to have secured additional project funding from the Walton Family Foundation for 2017. Going forward, the Ag Water Network will continue presenting the survey findings at workshops and meetings, and we'll also be broadening and strengthening our engagement with ag water right holders by:

- Holding webinars and workshops focused on ag water leasing.
- Developing topic-specific outreach information, including videos and media content.
- Conducting additional surveys of ag water right holders.
- Developing a simple lease screening tool that enables irrigators to assess their leasing potential.
- Developing a database of producers interested in leasing.
- Supporting and assisting with the development of ag water leasing transactions.

Ag water leasing represents a sustainable way of preserving irrigated ag land while also providing water for other uses and providing income diversification for producers. In 2016 we were able to firmly establish the Ag Water NetWORK as a valuable resource and guide for ag water right holders around the state. In 2017 we will be building on that foundation to further improve ag water right holders' access to information and tools that help *'keep ag water connected with ag land.'*

Phil Brink, CEP, is the consulting coordinator of the Colorado Cattlemen's Association's Ag Water NetWORK, a grant-funded initiative designed to help keep agricultural water connected with agricultural land. Contact Phil at [phil@brinkinc.biz](mailto:phil@brinkinc.biz) or Terry Fankhauser, CCA EVP at (303) 431-6422.