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As elsewhere, here in the Coachella Valley economies grow where water flows

Ben Olson, Special to The Desert Sun Published 8:00 a.m. PT Nov. 18, 2018



(Photo: Jay Calderon/The Desert Sun)

A century ago, the Coachella Valley looked nothing like it does today. But the foundation for its future growth and success was set in place those many years ago by forward-thinking pioneers who knew that economies grow where water flows.

Without water, growth in the valley would stop. The Coachella Valley Water District (CVWD) was formed as a flood control Special District in 1918.

Those early Coachella Valley farmers realized natural recharge of the basin was not going to provide sufficient water for the agricultural development our forefathers envisioned. The Colorado River, only 100 miles to the east, seemed like an excellent, potential water source. Both allocation and transport of the water was needed.

Local farmers and officials took many long trips to Washington, D.C. to solicit funds for the Boulder Canyon Project (1928). Additional imported water would become available to the Coachella Valley upon construction of Boulder Dam and the Coachella Canal.

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Circa 1948, their tenacity paid off and the 123-mile-long Coachella Canal was built from the Imperial Valley to Lake Cahuilla. There were very few urban taxpayers or property values to support the undertaking of such a water delivery source from the Colorado River. Hence, agricultural taxes and water fees predominantly paid for the infrastructure and transport of Colorado River water to the Coachella Valley. Without the foresight of these farmers, there would be no cities, golf courses, hotels, agriculture and booming economies.

More: [Farmers keep majority on Coachella Valley Water District board as John Powell Jr. defeats Ed Muzik](https://www.desertsun.com/story/news/environment/2018/11/07/farmers-keep-majority-cvwd-john-powell-jr-defeats-ed-muzik/1895789002/)
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The main difference between the Coachella Valley and surrounding communities is imported water. During the 1960s, CVWD General Manager Lowell Weeks, a fig and citrus farmer, joined forces with Desert Water Agency (DWA) to secure over 64,000 acre-feet of water rights from the newly formed State Water Project. Those have now grown to almost 200,000 acre-feet per year due to an exchange agreement between DWA, CVWD and Metropolitan Water District (MWD).

Imported water is still being used to replace the depleting aquifer, which has been available for urban use and continues to be used in the development of the Coachella Valley. This water is critical to the valley's massive agricultural industry and tourism trades, a health care industry which employs 14,000 and significant real estate development.

Since 1971, Coachella Valley farmers have been conserving water with drip or micro-spray irrigation. These conscientious growers were truly "The Original Water Conservationists" preceding state-mandated water conservation by over 40 years. Over 85 percent of the Coachella Valley farmers currently use some form of drip or micro-spray irrigation. Asking farmers to conserve an additional 15 percent more water will definitely reduce yields and severely stress plants. In the past 47 years, over 60,000 acres have been converted to drip or micro-spray irrigation

Congratulations to those early, and current, policy makers and CVWD Board members for their efforts in securing valuable imported water rights for the Coachella Valley. Farmers in the Coachella Valley produce a multitude of crops, including artichokes, dates, table grapes, lettuce, citrus, melons, peppers and other plants that thrive in our rich soil and warm winter climate.

For over 100 years, farmers have worked hard to procure and maintain imported water rights to fuel the local economies of the entire Coachella Valley.

Indeed, since ancient times, economies grow where water flows.



Ben Olson is a water engineer and associate board member of the not-for-profit Growing Coachella Valley, which fosters support from key industries, local businesses and residents to secure resources for the future of the Coachella Valley. Email him at Ben@oe-ca.com.

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