



2008 USDA-CSREES National Water Conference
Sparks, NV

Changing Colorado Agricultural Water Management: Reflections on a Failure of Adaptation

John D. Wiener

Abstract Text:

This presentation will review a failed attempt to establish a Water Bank Pilot Program in Colorado's Arkansas Valley, to compare it with traditional means of promotion of agricultural innovation. The legal innovation was radical for Colorado, which employs formalized, slow, and expensive adjudication of almost all water transfers changing place, timing, or use of water rights. Improved flexibility was sought for many reasons, from potential local agricultural benefit to increasing social pressure to provide alternatives to "buy-and-dry" water sales which have had severe local impacts on areas of origin. Shortly after the Pilot Program was authorized, Colorado experienced a severe drought, which increased the sense of urgency for change. Legislative responses have included authorization of several refinements and added opportunities for water leasing, and rotational crop management plans. Also, the State funded two overlapping major policy support studies and policy discourse processes, which have sharpened awareness of the scale of increasing urban demand, and the pressure on agricultural water security. But the first significant institutional innovation was treated as a legal change, and explained as a legal change – not as an agricultural innovation. This may be repeated for rotational fallowing, following a second legislative authorization; update will be provided. The lesson urged is that Extension methods and the history of success were overlooked. The goal was, from a larger perspective, increased ability to respond to changing conditions – which is improved adaptive capacity – and while researchers in climate adaptation and applications of climate information have learned this lesson, it seems that political decision-makers need greater appreciation of Extension. The presentation will focus on the human and social process problems, with the substantive content of the desired innovations described in hand-out materials and available elsewhere.

Impact Statement:

The series of projects from which this work is reported has included identification of potential climate and weather information uses, and pursuit of institutional changes needed to implement applications. While our involvement in the policy discourse has been apparently effective, realization of opportunities has been slow, so it is not yet possible to ascertain impact beyond discussion and rule-making.