

# Dream Of Water System Over 100 Years Old

The idea of building a water system to help keep North Dakota's semi-arid land productive is at least 100 years old. Here is a look at some of the important dates for the project.

**1889** At the time of the Constitutional Convention, a request was made to the U.S. Congress to consider constructing a canal to bring water across North Dakota from Montana to the Red River. The director of the U.S. Geological Survey, reportedly said the state, "will have to depend forever on artificial irrigation for all agriculture." His prediction was underscored when a three-year drought began that year.

**1891** People began to think it wasn't possible to farm the land and the State Legislature asked Congress for money for irrigation. In 1867 Devils Lake covered 142 square miles, but after that it started dropping and in 1888 fish began disappearing from the lake. The possibility of diverting Missouri River water to Devils Lake and other parts of eastern North Dakota was studied by the feds, but it was determined that the project wasn't feasible.

**1902** Congress passed the Reclamation Act which allowed for construction of irrigation works with receipts from the sale and disposal of public lands, encouraging hope.

**1903** The first state irrigation association was formed. James J. Hill, president of the Great Northern railroad and a member of the association, linked the idea of diverting Missouri River water with irrigation, but the idea wasn't taken seriously.

**1924** The people of Devils Lake began to organize an effort to make water development a reality.

**1933** A Fargo Forum story said, "Picture a great serpent-like lake cutting through North Dakota's prairies for a distance of 140 miles..." Those words described the dream turned into a mirage when all plans for the dam were rejected. The objections were that the site had an inadequate foundation and the benefits didn't balance costs.

from the Missouri into the basins of the Souris, James, Sheyenne, and Wild Rice rivers and Devils Lake.

**1946** Construction of Garrison Dam began.

**1953** Construction of the dam was completed.

**1955** The Legislature established the Garrison Diversion Conservancy District, a 25-county political subdivision authorized to levy an annual tax of up to 1 mill to help fund projects.

**1965** The project was reauthorized, but the number of acres to be irrigated was scaled down to 250,000.

**1978** The U.S. Supreme Court ruled against the state, when it took the federal government to court for changing its water policy.

**1981** Everyone from the Secretary of the Interior to local farmers disagreed over mitigation (the purchase of fish and wildlife land by the federal government to replace lands converted to other uses).

**1983** The Canadian government grew increasingly concerned over the effects of Missouri River water flowing into Canadian lakes and streams. The McClusky Canal was completed, but many plans were dropped or scaled back. A major link in the chain, Lonetree Reservoir, was abandoned. The Sykeston Canal was planned to replace it.

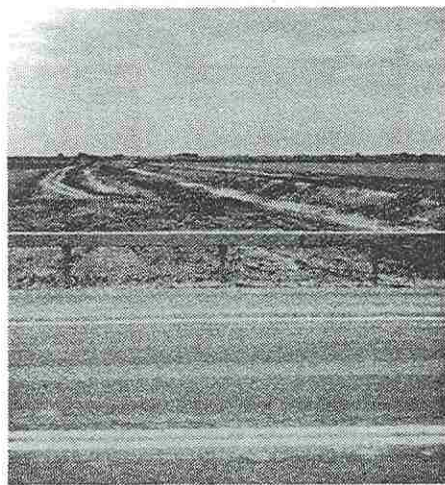
**1986** The Garrison Diversion Unit Reformulation Act of 1986 reduced the irrigation to 130,000 acres and shifted the emphasis to development of municipal, rural and industrial water supplies.

**1990** The dream of irrigating a million acres of crop land appears vast next to reality, after 50 years: 1,000 acres in the Oakes Research Test Area, established to determine the environmental effects of irrigation. Because of low water levels in the James River, only 600 acres are under irrigation in 1990.

The most recent development is the Conservancy District's desire for the state to take the initiative in planning. It hopes to abandon building the costly

1944 Plans once again began to flow when Congress authorized the Pick-Sloan Plan as part of the Flood Control Act of 1944. Six dams, including Garrison Dam, located from Montana to the Nebraska border. Pick-Sloan was a linking of the Corps of Engineer's plan for flood control, power and navigation, and the Bureau of Reclamation's plan for power and irrigation. W.G. Sloan authored the Bureau's plan. Gen. Lewis Pick developed the Corp's plan.

The plan included building Garrison Dam, irrigating 1,000,000 acres of land, flood control, development of fish, wildlife and recreation, and stabilization of Devils Lake. Water was to be moved



The New Rockford Canal is still under construction.

and controversial Sykeston Canal. The canal would be replaced by the Mid-Dakota Reservoir, a scale-down version of the Lonetree Reservoir. Recently the directors voted to up the mill levy to the full 1 mill to give the state funding to lay the groundwork.

The idea of diverting water from the Missouri is now 100 years old. Hundreds of millions of dollars have gone into a project that once again stands at a cross roads as the people of North Dakota evaluate plans for the future and unfulfilled dreams.

*Information in this story came from newspaper stories on file at the Bismarck Library and the Bismarck Tribune Library.*

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are established by law through the State Health Department and rates charged are set by the Department of Human Services.

Clearly the state has control of the program and why the counties pay the bill is a classic definition of a mandate. In the future, counties may not be able to budget or fund for these costs and a great disparity between levels of care will result, hurting only those who may end up in more restrictive and costly settings because basic, less expensive, care isn't available to them.