

From Taxpayers for the Animas River House Votes to Kill ALP

by Michael Black

Opponents of the last major Bureau of Reclamation water scheme, the Animas La Plata Project (ALP), won a significant victory this Summer when the U.S. House of Representatives voted 221 to 200 to cut-off funding.

The House action came as a result of the efforts of local, national, environmental and taxpayers groups to kill the Project.

Said Durango, Colorado, resident and Taxpayers for the Animas River (TAR) member Jim Decker, "This shows that Congress is taking its fiscal and environmental responsibilities seriously."

The ALP is designed to draw water out of the Animas River in Durango, Colorado, pump it uphill to a storage reservoir south of town. From there the water would be pumped to the La Plata River Basin where it would be used for irrigation, real estate and coal development. Some of the water would again be pumped to the Mancos drainage to provide irrigation water to the Ute Mountain Ute Tribe. In addition the project would supply municipal and industrial water for Durango and New Mexico cities along the Animas and San Juan rivers as well as to the Ute tribes.

The action to cut-off funding was a bipartisan effort led by Rep. Tom Petri (R - Wisconsin) and Rep. Pete DeFazio (D - Oregon). In floor debate the Congressmen cited the enormous cost, the lack of benefits and environmental problems of the ALP.

Congressman Petri said, "Just on the face of it, pumping water 1,000-feet uphill into another watershed, largely for irrigation, does not appear to be a sensible thing to do. I know of no other irrigation system with such an inherently uneconomic basic design..."

Although the Indian water rights provide an excuse for this project, they are not its driving force. The driving force is high Federal water subsidies for local non-Indian water users... There is no national interest what-so-ever in forcing my constituents—and everyone else's too—to pay for the massive water subsidies in ALP."

Congressman DeFazio added, "It is a water project that has been sold as an Indian water rights settlement, except that it will not deliver affordable or usable water to the Indian tribes in question. It is a project that will deliver \$5,000 an acre irrigation subsidy to non-Indian farmers in the high desert of southwest Colorado, so they can grow low-value crops. Two-thirds of the water will go to them if this project is ever completed, if we void the environmental laws, if we go ahead with a project that will produce 36 cents of benefits for every Federal dollar invested."

Supporters of the ALP cited the settlement of Ute tribal claims as justification. Congressman Scott McInnis, a Republican from Colorado, in whose district the Project would be built stated, "Years ago when I was a young man I liked to trade baseball cards... After I made an agreement to trade the card, guess what? I found out that I could have gotten a lot more than I did. So I went to my father and my mother. They were both business people. I asked them, I said, I can get a lot

better deal... But my father and my mother said one thing to me. This is exactly what they said, 'Son, keep your word.' "

Said Congressman Meyers (R - Indiana) "You have to go along [with the ALP] or you destroy the whole system of government."

Despite this significant victory in the House opponents of the ALP were not completely successful. The Senate voted to include ALP funding in their version of the appropriations bill. A decision will be made in the conference committee on which version will be accepted. But even if the Project gets funded supporters will have to go back to Congress next year and ask for \$60 to 70 million for a construction start. With the growing knowledge of the deficiencies of the ALP and the greater fiscal responsibility of Congress it is very unlikely that money will be available in the future.

The House vote was the result of an intensive campaign waged by local groups, Taxpayers for the Animas River, Four Corners Action Coalition and Southern Ute Grassroots Organization, allied with major national environmental and taxpayers organizations.

"For \$7,000 an acre maybe we could grow corn in Antarctica. But that doesn't make sense and neither does this." Congressman Tom Petri (R - Wisconsin) on the Animas La Plata Project.

Crucial to the success of the campaign was the hiring of a Washington D.C. lobbyist to represent the local groups and coordinate activities in Washington. With voluntary donations collected locally, opponents hired Bob Roach, of the law firm Spiegall and McDermid. He contracted for half his usual fee for less than 1/4 time, but worked tirelessly and effectively. Project opponents were forced into hiring a lobbyist by the hundreds of thousands of dollars of taxpayers money the supporters of the ALP have spent in their efforts to secure funding. They have even hired an ex-Congressman, Ray Kogosek.

Working with Bob Roach opponents managed to get facts about the ALP on the table and when Congressmen saw the true cost of the Project and its clear lack of benefits they voted against it.

A more intensive campaign will be needed next year. The expertise, knowledge and coordination provided by Mr. Roach will be crucial. More time needs to be devoted to the Senate educating them on the ALP. And, of course, they need to protect the gains in the House.

Says TAR President Dr. Tom McCulloch, "It is difficult for a grassroots organization that relies on voluntary donations to raise the kind of money we need. But it is absolutely necessary."

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Michael Black is a river guide and member of TAR, a Durango group formed in 1979 to oppose the ALP. TAR is one of the oldest grassroots organizations in Colorado state working on river issues.

Donations can be sent to: Taxpayers of the Animas River, 1611 Forest Ave.: Durango, CO, 81301.