

Border Fight Focuses on Water, Not Immigration



Sandy Huffaker for The New York Times

Farmers near Mexicali have long relied on seepage from the All-American Canal to irrigate their fields. [More Photos >](#)

THE NEW YORK TIMES
JULY 7, 2006

CALEXICO, Calif. — For more than 100 years, as their names imply, Calexico and its much larger sister city, Mexicali, south of the border, have embraced each other with a bonhomie born of mutual need and satisfaction in the infernal desert.



The New York Times

The pedestrian gate into [Mexico](#) clangs ceaselessly as Mexicans lug back bulging bags from Wal-Mart and 99 Cent Stores in Calexico. The line into the United States slogs along, steady but slower, through an air-conditioned foyer as men and women trudge off to work and, during the school year, children wear the universal face that greets the coming day.

Now, the ties that bind Calexico and Mexicali are being tested as a 20-year dispute over the rights to water leaking into Mexico from a canal on the American side is reaching a peak. Though the raging debate over illegal [immigration](#) in the United States has not upset border relations here, some say the fight over water could affect the number of Mexicans who try to cross here illegally.

To slake the ever-growing thirst of San Diego, 100 miles to the west, the United States has a plan to replace a 23-mile segment of the earthen All-American Canal, which the federal government owns and the Colorado River feeds, with a concrete-lined parallel trough.

The \$225 million project would send more water to San Diego, by cutting off billions of leaked gallons — enough for 112,000 households a year — that have helped irrigate Mexican farms since the 1940's.

But Mexican farmers and their advocates say the lined canal would effectively turn off the spigot for 25,000 people, including 400 farmers whose wells rely on the seepage that has helped turn the powdery fields east of Mexicali, an industrial city, into one of the biggest Mexican producers of onions, alfalfa, asparagus, squash and other crops.

The farmers and their families ask what will they do if they cannot till the fields and answer that they will cross the border, illegally if they have to, in droves.

"They can't build a fence high enough to stop us," said Gerónimo Hernández, a Mexicali farmer whose family has worked the fields for generations.

Juan Ignacio Guajardo, a lawyer in Mexicali who is helping a civic group there and two environmental groups in Southern California fight

the canal, said, "You can't have it both ways," adding, "You can't take our water away and then say, 'We don't want immigration, either.' "

The dispute over the project was among the topics President Bush and President Vicente Fox of Mexico discussed in an April meeting in Mexico.

[A federal judge ruled against environmental groups in the United States and a Mexicali civic association in a lawsuit against the project, dismissing some claims on June 26 on technicalities and deciding on July 3 that many of the predicted effects on Mexico were "highly speculative" and that the federal environmental law at issue did not apply beyond the border. The groups said they were preparing an appeal. In addition, a separate lawsuit is pending in state court.]

On the American side, managers of the Imperial Irrigation District, which controls the canal and a vast water system that has turned swaths of the [California](#) desert in the Imperial and Coachella Valleys into some of the most fertile farmland anywhere, defend the plan.

They say the 1944 international treaty on the distribution of water from the Colorado River, which feeds the canal, does not prohibit the concrete lining. New agreements among the states and water utilities along the Colorado have imposed limits on how much water can be tapped from the river, making every drop count that much more.

"There is more need than water available," said the general manager of the irrigation district, Charles Hosken. "When you find a point to access water, I think it is our duty to go after it."

Mr. Hosken acknowledged that the project, which has been mired in legal challenges and planning since the 1980's, "will have impact" on Mexico, but said, "The fact is, the water belongs to the United States, and we have never been compensated for it."

He said he was particularly angry at opponents of the project who invoke the immigration debate, which while discussed here, has not set off the fiery passions found elsewhere.

The notion that cutting off the leakage would drive up illegal immigration, he said, was "quite a stretch" and a "scare tactic" intended to take advantage of the charged atmosphere surrounding the debate.

But opponents said the project was moving forward without enough consideration of its potential effects.

The federal lawsuit contended that a study in 1994 of the project's environmental consequences was outdated and should be revised to take into account changes of the last 12 years.

The groups argued in the suit that the original study did not fully take into account a projected increase in air pollution if the fields were returned to dust or the deterioration of Mexican wetlands if the leaking water were to dry up and remove the habitat of endangered birds and lizards.

In the state lawsuit, filed in April, another environmental group contends that the concrete lining and the shape of the new canal would produce swifter currents that would endanger people and animals. That group says it plans to seek a temporary restraining order against the project.

California has agreed to pay for 60 percent of the project, with the San Diego County Water Authority financing the rest. Malissa Hathaway McKeith, president of Citizens United for Resources and the Environment, a group in the federal lawsuit, said Gov. [Arnold Schwarzenegger](#) could halt the project by withholding the state money until the environmental effects were studied more closely.

A spokeswoman for Mr. Schwarzenegger, Margita Thompson, said such a move was far from likely because the governor thought that the water recovered from the lining would lessen the need to tap the Colorado.

"This will help provide long-term stability in water management," Ms. Thompson said.

The dispute has touched a nerve in Calexico, which, with a population of 33,000, mostly Spanish speakers of Mexican descent, functions as a virtual suburb of Mexicali, which has nearly one million residents.

The mayor and Council of Calexico have sided with the Mexicali farmers, taking pains to make clear that Mexicans are welcome here in part because they fear that economic distress in the region could damage their economy, which is buoyed by Mexican wallets.

"If we didn't have Mexico," said Mayor Alex Perrone, who like many other city residents was born in Mexicali and reared in Calexico, "we could not survive."

So intertwined are the towns that Calexico fire trucks race across the border for emergencies. Mexicali children fill private schools in Calexico. Special border-crossing cards known as laser visas make it easy for many Mexicans to go back and forth, though some sneak in, too, hiding in cars or scaling the steel-plate fence.

Ire against the new canal has grown in Mexicali, where bumper stickers opposing it are turning up.

"How can they take away the farmers' water after all these years?" asked Juan Rodolfo Rodríguez, a Mexicali shopkeeper who was buying a caffè latte at the Starbucks shop here. "Americans always want more, but we are used to this."

Farmers like the Hernández family fear they would not have the resources to find alternate water sources, like digging deeper wells to tap an underground aquifer.

"It would be costly to maintain," said Luis Hernández, Gerónimo Hernández's brother. "And who knows if it would give us the same amount of water?"