

History of Pick Sloan of North Dakota

North Dakota water folks are well aware of the Pick Sloan Act – the basis of the Flood Control Act of 1944 that applies directly to our present-day use and management of the Missouri River System in North Dakota.

A full understanding of the history of Pick Sloan requires a general sense of the history of the Missouri River Basin. The Missouri River, at nearly 2,540 miles in length, is the longest river in the United States. It is a recipient of water from the largest basin in the country (528,000 square miles), which is comparable to one-sixth of the size of the 48 lower states.

But even though it is the longest river and in the largest basin, it is one of the lowest-yielding rivers in terms of water runoff and conveyance in the country. This is so because it exists, to a large part, in the great American West, which is notable for generally low rainfall and ongoing and recurring periods of drought.

Combining low-water yields and large land areas has led to conflicts, especially between the two major federal agencies with authority to manage such large rivers and

watersheds and who, in a general sense, have conflicting water management policies and principals. The Army Corps of Engineers has a water policy based on water abundance, so its historical emphasis is how to manage and use such abundance. Its policies, therefore, revolve to a large part around flood control and navigation. Conversely, the US Bureau of Reclamation has a water policy based on water scarcity. From that perspective, the Bureau of Reclamation focuses on using all available water for consumptive purposes, such as irrigation and water supplies, and for power generation (particularly as power is needed to support irrigation).

Early congressional actions set the stage for the federal management of the river system. In 1824, the U.S. Supreme Court recognized navigation as a federal commerce issue; thereby authorizing and directing the Corps of Engineers to pursue programs to assist and promote river navigation.



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Missouri River Basin Program (later named the Pick-Sloan Missouri Basin Program) was authorized in the Flood Control Act of 1944.



W. Glenn Sloan and General Pick.

However, Congress also enacted the Reclamation Act of 1902, which provided a federal focus and direction to create and support irrigation projects, particularly in the Midwest and West. The Buford Trenton Irrigation Project in northwest North Dakota was a child of that legislation.

The competing interests of the two federal agencies (the Corps and the Bureau) paralleled the competing interests of the basin states of the Missouri River. Upstream states Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Wyoming and Colorado favored the programs pursued by the Bureau. They wanted secure water supply sources, irrigation development and power generation. Downstream basin states Nebraska, Iowa, Kansas and Missouri had a focus on flood control and navigation support. The competition of these interests led to conflicting programs and plans of management of the river system. In the early parts of the 20th century, devastating floods which mostly affected the highly populated areas of the downstream states led Congress to request an overall river management plan that would satisfy all the needs of the system, both upstream and downstream, and both Corps focused and Bureau focused.

Entering the picture at this point were Gen. Lewis Pick of the Army Corps of Engineers and Bureau District Engineer Glenn Sloan. Both gentlemen had strong feelings and very defined ideas on how to achieve river management. The

Corps submitted the Pick Plan in 1939, which envisioned a focus on new levees to support both flood control and navigation in the southern basin. The Pick Plan called for 1,500 miles of such levees, with 18 tributary dams and five mainstem dams. The cost of the Pick Plan, in 1944 dollars, was expected to be near \$490 million.

The Sloan Plan developed in 1944 had a different vision; calling for dams and river management to support 5.3 million acres of irrigation, with 85 tributary dams and only three mainstem dams. Embedded in the Sloan Plan were 17 power plants to support the anticipated irrigation. The cost of the Sloan Plan, in 1944 dollars, was expected to be near \$1.26 billion.

With a nudge from Congress, and to circumvent the government creating yet another federal agency based on the Tennessee Valley Authority, the Corps and Bureau agreed on a joint plan, soon to be named the Pick Sloan Plan. The Pick Sloan Plan provided authorization for approximately 100 dams (both tributary and mainstem) and for irrigation of 1.7 million acres (mostly promised to the upstream states of Montana, North Dakota and South Dakota), and for extensive channelization of the river for navigation support downstream of Sioux City, Iowa.

The full list of benefits included what is now commonly known and referred to as the Authorized Purposes that include Water Supply, Irrigation, Power Generation, Flood Control, Recreation, Navigation, and Fish and Wildlife support. The cost of the combined programs was estimated in 1944 at \$1.2 billion. Also important in the combined plan was an agreement between the Corps and the Bureau on the issue of river and dam management and operations. The Corps obtained the operational authority of the dams and the Bureau secured the ability to issue irrigation and water use permits and contracts and control power allocations from the dams. However, the creation of the Western Area Power Authority in 1977, under the Department of Energy, diluted the Bureau control of power.

Today, nearly 75 years after the Pick Sloan Act was adopted, North Dakotans are still either reaping the benefits from the decisions made in 1944 or feeling the consequences. Please watch for future articles from the Missouri River Joint Board that will further discuss those benefits and consequences.

SAVE THE DATE

**Missouri River Stakeholders Meeting
Wednesday, August 10, 2022 • Mandan**

Sponsored jointly by the Missouri River Joint Water Board and the Missouri River Advisory Council.

MORE INFORMATION TO FOLLOW.