

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
COLLEGE OF AGRICULTURE
AGRICULTURAL EXPERIMENT STATION
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A PLAN FOR RECLAIMING AND PEOPLING
THE MESA LANDS BORDERING THE
IMPERIAL IRRIGATION DISTRICT

BY ELWOOD MEAD

In Imperial Valley, on the southern border of California, there are over 200,000 acres of public land which can be irrigated from the Colorado River by a canal which would start at the Laguna dam and carry water, both to the mesa land and to the Imperial Irrigation District. This dam was built by the United States Reclamation Service and belongs to the government. A survey to locate the canal from this dam to the Imperial Valley, and an estimate of its cost, have been made at the joint expense of the United States Reclamation Service and the Imperial Irrigation District. The writer of the letter which follows was the chairman of the board which had charge of the survey and which made the estimate of its cost.

This land is the upper part of the gently sloping sides of the Salton Basin. The lower part of this great bowl, or basin, is the Imperial Irrigation District, watered by a canal from the Colorado River, but starting farther down and making a long loop into Mexico before reaching the land to be irrigated.

It is planned to build a high line canal, large enough to supply both the unirrigated mesa land and the Imperial District, and to have the entire canal on American territory. The Imperial District and the higher unirrigated land are both to share in its cost, hence less than half the expense of the main canal referred to in the letter which follows would be a charge on the mesa land. A bill has been intro-

duced in Congress, authorizing the sale of the irrigable public land in tracts of 160 acres and the use of money thus obtained to help finance construction; the greater part of the money to come, however, from an issue of certificates of indebtedness by the United States Treasury.

These unirrigated mesa lands are now an arid desert where a horned toad can hardly live, but they have great prospective value. They are separated from the irrigated land of the Imperial District by only the width of a canal. Below the canal land sells for \$150 to \$300 an acre. If irrigated, the higher lands would be worth as much, and on 20 to 40 acres a family could make a comfortable living. If these lands are sold in their present arid condition they will be bought at arid land prices, but not by landless homeseekers. These will come after canals are built and water is available and they will have to pay irrigated land prices. Such a sale will make the mesa a fat field for speculation.

The letter which follows was written in response to requests from the two gentlemen to whom it was addressed and who are residents of the valley, asking for a statement of the methods and policies which the writer believes should control the reclamation and peopling of this area.

The policy advocated is approved by the State Land Settlement Board and those members of the faculty of the state university who have studied the conditions and problems of the proposed development.

Mr. JACOB LORANG,
R. D. 1, Box 32,
Imperial, California.

Mr. A. M. NELSON,
El Centro, California.

My Dear Sirs:

I have recently had letters from each of you of much the same tenor. Both refer to the efforts being made by the people of the Imperial Valley to secure the irrigation and settlement of the mesa lands, and both ask for a statement of my views on certain matters connected therewith.

The public interest shown in this matter is a good feature. It is an undertaking that needs to be thought out to a conclusion before work begins. This is one of the largest, is not the largest, body of irrigable land in public ownership yet awaiting settlement. The control of the land and the plan to be followed in its settlement will do much to shape the social and economic results. These results, in times like the present, are of great moment.

IRRIGATION WORKS SHOULD BE BUILT BY THE GOVERNMENT

To reclaim and people this land will require a very large expenditure. The main canal, built large enough to supply the whole valley, with the main supply canals for the mesa lands, and the storage works which will be required to insure ample water, will cost between \$30,000,000 and \$40,000,000. The improvement and equipment of small farms on the mesa will cost from \$15,000,000 to \$20,000,000. So that, in some way, about \$50,000,000 must be raised and spent. I think all realize that use of the government's credit will be needed in obtaining this money and the best results will come from making it a coöperative state and national undertaking. The government can provide money to build the needed canals and storage works at a lower rate of interest and under more favorable conditions than it can be secured in any other way and low interest rates and long time payments will be needed to enable struggling settlers to succeed.

If the government furnishes the money, the reservoir and main canals should be built by the United States Reclamation Service. The simplest plan would be for the government to sell water to the present Imperial District, and to any districts which may be formed on the mesa, at a price which will maintain the works and return 3½ or 4% interest on the investment. The distributing systems in each district should be owned and operated by the district.

Title to the land should be retained by the government until the irrigation works are completed and water is available for irrigation. Settlers could then begin the improvement and cultivation of their farms as soon as they went on the land. It should be sold only to actual settlers in small individual farms. The town sites should be located and laid out, like the farms, according to some carefully thought out plan, so that the people who make their homes on what is now a desert will feel that they have all the aid that science and experience can give.

NEED FOR A MORE SOCIAL LAND SETTLEMENT POLICY

This means a new kind of development, but there are weighty reasons why the primitive practices of the past should give way to better ones. We are living in a time when people are thinking as never before about the right of those who live on the land to own the farms they cultivate. The longing for this and the satisfaction of those who enjoy this privilege is seen in all countries. Where the land is owned by its cultivators, as in France and Denmark, government is stable. Where no attention has been paid to land hunger, and where tenantry has prevailed, countries are in the throes of revolution. Hungary and Russia are two illustrations.

Since the beginning of this century some countries have sensed this growing desire for landed independence and have spent huge sums to gratify it. It has resulted in one of the greatest agrarian advances of all time. Believing that no expenditure or effort was

too great to insure the retention of the right kind of people in the country, governments have bought privately owned land and sold it in small individual tracts to its former cultivators under conditions that enable them to pay for it. In this way tenantry has given way to home owned farms and the movement of land born people to the city has been checked.

Every nation that adopted this policy has derived immense benefits from its action. All except those prevented by war are today doing more than ever before. California was the first state in America to recognize the importance of this matter. It has utilized the experience of other countries in framing a successful policy of state aid and direction in land settlement. The benefits of the first experiment at Durham were so marked that the last legislature, without opposition, appropriated \$1,000,000 to buy more land and establish other settlements. A bond issue of \$10,000,000 has been authorized and will be voted on at the next election. The state has, therefore, a working plan and the likelihood of a large fund with which to create new communities, made up of both soldier and civilian settlers, and which will give broader opportunities to people of small means to become home owners. *The land settlement law ought to be utilized in the development of a part of the mesa lands.*

There is now pending in Congress a soldier settlement bill, which, if passed, will provide for planned rural development throughout the nation. *A part of this land ought to be settled under the national soldier settlement act.* If this plan is adopted, two public agencies, the nation and the state of California, would work in friendly emulation to show what skill, knowledge, and experience could do. Both settlements would have two and four-acre homes for farm workers, the feature of Durham which has proven of such social and economic value. There would be farms of different sizes to meet the needs of men with and without families, and for different kinds of culture.

The first step in this planned development would be classification of the land, based on its fertility and on the cost of preparing it for irrigation. The acreage price of the different farms would not be the same, but would be fixed so as to make them, as nearly as possible, equally attractive. There would be organized, coöperative action in building houses, grading land, seeding crops, buying livestock, seeds and implements. This would save losses of time and money by settlers and insure a rapid and prosperous development. Land opened to settlement under this plan would be sought by people who would not only be good farmers, but good citizens. They would all live on their farms and be interested in the enduring success of that section. Such an outcome would make development sound financially and the social and economic results would justify the expenditure of public funds to bring them about. The policy will appeal to the common sense and sympathy of the whole nation. Legislation by Congress to provide money for this development can, I believe, be secured.

OBJECTIONS TO PROPOSED SALE OF THE LANDS

The land policy outlined in the Kettner bill is based on a different idea. It leaves each settler to shift for himself and makes the peopling of this area and the creation of towns and farm homes a matter of uncoördinated individual effort. This, for people to whom the problems of irrigation are strange and new and who have little money, is a hard and risky undertaking. It proposes, as the first step, to raise a guarantee fund by selling the public land in 160-acre tracts. The land would be sold, therefore, before there was any water for irrigation or any certainty as to when it would be provided. Those who would buy under such conditions might want to farm, but many would buy to reap the increments of value which would follow development. *Every land owner who bought at this sale would, to that extent, restrict the opportunities of landless farm seekers.*

The land is to be sold under this bill without any proper classification of the soil. This classification should be made to enable people not familiar with the valley to know the relative value of different areas. The size of the unit in which the land is to be sold is too large. The land is to be sold before any one can live there and without conditions which will insure residence by the owner. These lands would not, therefore, be bought by people who ought to find homes here. Land hungry people of small means can not invest \$1600 in cash or provide it in five years while waiting for government or corporate canal building.

Another bad outcome of this plan would be that all the land would not be sold. Only the best areas would find purchasers. The government would hold the culls, with the most desirable areas in private hands. Irrigation is to be provided by the use of the government's credit. The help would go largely to those who do not need aid to become farm owners. I do not believe that public opinion will regard this with favor.

If such a plan should be adopted, it would make soldier or civilian settlement on this area, by the California Land Settlement Board, costly, if not impossible. No large area could be secured without paying high prices to those who had, under this act, bought from the government at a nominal price. Such a performance would be a travesty. It would show an entire absence of foresight.

SETTLEMENT SHOULD BE AIDED AND DIRECTED BY THE GOVERNMENT

I believe, therefore, that the sale of these lands in advance of development would be a social and economic mistake. The mesa lands ought to be regarded as one of the fields where democracy can show what it can do for those that need its aid. Every influence which those interested in the progress of rural civilization could exert would, I am sure, be brought to bear to secure the funds for the construction of

the irrigation works as a part of this policy. This matter has not been brought to the attention of the State Land Settlement Board, but, at our meeting on Thursday, August 14, I will call attention to the benefits which would come to the state and to settlers by its undertaking to aid and direct the settlement of, say 40,000 to 50,000 acres of this area found to be suitable by the soils experts of the university. Some of the funds to be provided by the state bond issue could nowhere be used to better advantage than in helping to create homes on this unpeopled area. If the state were to direct and aid in the development of such an area, it would mean loans to the settlers of fully \$2,000,000 to help to improve and equip their farms. It would put these settlers on their feet and in a position to meet payments on water rights and improvements and create in a short time homes of comfort and prosperity that would make this valley a source of pride and satisfaction, not only to the state, but to the nation. The same results would follow soldier settlement on a larger area under the Mondell bill. No such results would follow the plan outlined in the Kettner bill. It would be an unplanned development where a large percentage of the land would be held by non-resident owners and cultivated by tenants. This is a feature that we must struggle to avert with energy and persistence.

I sympathize with the efforts of all those that are seeking this development, even where I differ with them as to methods. The land and water are unused. Great values can be created, but I believe we have come to the point when we must consider public resources like land and water as a trust to be administered in the public interest and thus make economic democracy a concrete reality which all can see and understand.

I hope that these views will commend themselves to you and others interested and that steps will be taken to amend the Kettner bill along the lines indicated. I would suggest, as helping to bring about an agreement, that a conference be held where this matter would be dealt with as a state problem. That is what it is. People in all parts of the state long to own farms. Many of these people would like to secure homes in this area. The university would be a convenient place for a gathering of state agencies interested in rural progress. These would include, among others, the State Engineering Office, the State Water Commission, the Irrigation Investigations, the State Land Settlement Board, the College of Agriculture, the U. S. Reclamation Service, and delegates from the Irrigation District, the Board of Supervisors, the American Legion, and the Farm Bureau of Imperial County and District. Cannot such a conference be held in the near future?

Sincerely yours,

ELWOOD MEAD.

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