

Provo River Restoration Sailing Along

KARL CATES. The Salt Lake Tribune. Salt Lake City, Utah: [Nov 7, 1999](#). pg. C.3
Copyright Salt Lake Tribune Nov 7, 1999

In the blink of an eye -- as riparian time goes -- a river that races between man-made dikes across the Heber Valley will slow into a meandering likeness of its natural predecessor.

Five years hence, 12 miles of the Provo River will have been "restored" into a blue-ribbon trout fishery. The \$30 million project is payback for the environmental impacts created elsewhere around the state by the \$2 billion Central Utah Project.

The river was dredged and channeled in less environmentally conscious times by the federal Bureau of Reclamation as part of a post-World War II program for flood control. Now flood control is handled upstream by Jordanelle Dam.

Though the river's reclamation was at first staunchly resisted as a federal incursion in a largely privately held valley, most landowners today seem resigned to the idea. Its reception in many local quarters remains cool, however.

The Utah Reclamation Mitigation and Conservation Commission, a presidentially appointed body supervising the work, is buying or condemning hundreds of riverside acres for the effort. It formally began rerouting the river this year with a 1.45-mile pilot project at the north end of the valley just below Jordanelle Reservoir.

"I can't think of a bigger waste of money," said Bill McNaughtan, a fourth-generation farmer who sold part of his family's river-bottom property to the commission after deciding the effort would proceed with or without him.

"The time to have argued is long past," said McNaughtan. He said that when the commission first floated the idea of reintroducing bends and wetlands to the Provo River several years ago, it had the whiff of inevitability.

The product of a 1992 compromise between water developers and conservationists, the commission carries the mandate of some \$200 million worth of environmental restoration within the CUP's boundaries. Other work includes resurrecting Great Salt Lake wetlands and renovating the banks of the Jordan River.

One of the last of the federal government's massive water projects in the West, the CUP's main purpose is to tap water sources in the Uinta Mountains and on the eastern slope of the Wasatch Mountains and carry it via tunnels and pipelines to the urban Wasatch Front.

Among scores of parcels targeted for takeover for the Provo River restoration was a 54-acre hay field McNaughtan's father deeded to him.

"I decided not to lose any sleep over it and told myself that they can have it, but it's going to cost them so much that they'll love it as dearly as I do," McNaughtan said.

And the commission has paid handsome sums for such land -- between \$18,000 and \$30,000 per acre, according to Michael C. Weland, executive director of the commission. Weland said about one-third of the property sought for restoration has been acquired and owners of another one-third are in negotiations.

Ray Hult sold 40 acres after receiving assurances the river would not be turned into a high-traffic parkway with lots of visitors, mostly city dwellers he feared would trespass on neighboring farmland.

"We would've had people coming through catching our lambs, riding our horses, chasing our cows."

"This is land that had never been for sale," added Hult. Like McNaughtan, he parted with it to avoid condemnation and got a fair price.

Mike Kohler, a Wasatch County commissioner, also agreed to terms on 50 of his family's acres. Kohler said the project is flawed because it caters to a narrow audience of fly-fishing enthusiasts.

"I look at it as a private environmental preserve," said Kohler, although he was quick to add that the county would do well to advertise it. "The fact is, it's coming and we need to use it as much as we can now to enhance the economy."

Down river, near Deer Creek Reservoir, 20 acres of Sharron Winterton's 150-acre farm is on the commission's purchase list, and Winterton is in talks with the agency. But he is baffled by a project with benefits he considers more aesthetic than economic: "All this for frogs and snakes?"

Winterton, whose grandfather homesteaded the farm in 1867, has a good portion of the rest of his land up for sale as well, as the area becomes less agrarian and more suburban. Winterton's farm likely will be purchased by developers who hope to take advantage of a population boom that has already seen Heber City's tract housing redefine the horizon east of Winterton's barns within the last few years.

Trout-fishing enthusiasts applaud the project, noting that it will add two miles to the length of the river and another 10 miles of side channels.

"More river is better river," said Harley Jackson, a fly-fishing guide who plies the corridor frequently. And Jackson said the fishery's rejuvenation has been a long time coming.

"One river in the whole state dedicated to [trout fishing] is not asking too much . . . it's one of the finest rivers in the West and it's only going to get finer."

Rick Hansen, owner of Trout Bum 2, a new fly-fishing outfitter in Park City, said silt associated with the river's reconstruction might initially hamper fishing, but longer-range benefits will be profound.

He added that it will create a following that will translate into tourism dollars. To make his point, Hansen said that since its opening a few months ago, his shop has sponsored more than 200 guided trips along the river for clients who are mostly from out of state.

County Commissioner LaRen Provost said that while he is disappointed in the costly local impacts of such a project -- which will create new demands on local law enforcement, for instance -- he conceded the CUP has offered the Heber Valley enormous benefits that sometimes go unacknowledged in the river debate.

"Hundreds of millions of dollars from the CUP will have gone into this valley when it's all said and done," agreed Claude Hicken, a Heber City resident and chairman of the Central Utah Water Conservancy District, which administers the CUP.

The CUP, he said, paid for Jordanelle Reservoir, state-park facilities around the reservoir and much of the cost of the new highways that skirt it.

In addition, the CUP has spent tens of millions so far for the Wasatch County Water Efficiency Project, which is modernizing virtually all the valley's traditional flood irrigation east of the Provo River into sprinkler systems. And the CUP has engineered the Daniels Replacement Pipeline, a project that essentially provides Jordanelle water to farmers who have relied on diversions from the more distant Strawberry Valley.

The river's restoration, Hicken said, is icing on the cake, an opinion that marks a revision of his earlier thoughts about it.

"It was the craziest thing you could imagine -- putting bends back in a river -- and I thought these guys had gone nuts," Hicken said. "Now I think that long-term, that river corridor is going to be one of the most valuable areas in the valley."