

Conclusions

Irrigation development in Saskatchewan is a mega project whose time has come!

Early visionaries identified the potential of this dry heartland of the Prairie to become a transformative force in the agricultural economy of Saskatchewan. The potential has yet to be realized. The analysis contained in this evaluation makes it clear that there are major long term benefits that can be achieved for the region, the Province and Canada from the development of the province's water resources for irrigation. The benefits of this development will be seen in many areas including:

- Increased and more stable agricultural incomes.
- Value added processing.
- A growing rural population.
- Tourism development.
- Water supply benefits to improve water quality for both small rural centres and the nearby adjacent cities of Saskatoon, Regina, Moose Jaw, North Battleford and Swift Current.
- Environmental benefits in the form of expanded wetlands and native habitat.
- Increased revenues to federal and provincial governments.

The importance of developing the irrigation resource should also be seen as a significant adaptation response to a warming Prairie climate. Climate change in the prairies will threaten dryland agricultural production, many parts of the natural environment and prospects for value added processing as the risk of commodity supply interruptions increase with drought and other extreme weather events.

Unlike the neighbouring provinces of Alberta, and more recently Manitoba, the progress towards agricultural diversification based on irrigation has been inconsistent and irregular. After an early start at the beginning of the 20th Century there have been stops and starts in expanding irrigation acreage, including the rejection of the South Saskatchewan River Project in 1952 only to see it start again in the 1960s. Expanding acreage in the 1970s and 1980s was followed by a slow down and eventual decline.

Today the conditions are once again excellent for irrigation expansion. Markets for increased production from the farm and processing off the farm are available. Water supplies and water management and conservation systems are evolving to allow for the sustainable use of available water storage in the province, including Lake Diefenbaker waters and other water storage infrastructure. The returns to farmers and society from a fully diversified irrigation economy have been measured and would make significant contributions to provincial output (GDP), household incomes and employment. The value of water when used in a comprehensive irrigated value chain is clearly as high, if not higher, than most competing uses for the water.

However, irrigation development is more than an economic calculus.

For many years the challenge of a declining rural economy and society has been a dilemma for federal, provincial and municipal governments across Canada. The long term development through irrigation offers a very real opportunity to create a permanent and sustainable transformation of the rural dryland farming economy in much of Saskatchewan. In economic development terms it can be seen as investing in the next generation of general purpose technologies to adapt to the emerging market conditions and the changing climate. The results will be seen not only in the economic and financial returns to producers, municipalities and society, but also in the revitalization of a major part of rural Saskatchewan at a time when global warming will certainly threaten the very foundations of much of dryland agriculture.

The institutional framework for irrigation development in Saskatchewan needs strengthening. The Saskatchewan Irrigation Projects Association provides leadership and direction for the development of provincial irrigation. Stronger frameworks are required for public private cooperation, long term planning and investment in regional water works, on-farm investments, value added agri-food processing and infrastructure. Irrigation development requires many years for the full benefits to be realized. It requires new public private regional partnerships to develop and coordinate the planning on the ground and the long term investments and infrastructure requirements of all of the parties involved to maximize the benefits for the their region and the province.

The lessons of history, however, make it clear that public investment alone is not a sufficient pre-condition for irrigation to thrive and prosper in Saskatchewan. The province has more irrigation potential than anywhere else in the Prairies or the United States. Long term coordinated planning will be required on the part of producers, local people, governments and the private sector. Long standing barriers to irrigation development will require resolution including financing, infrastructure, power supply and an aging population. Stable public policy frameworks will be required to last beyond the electoral cycles of government. New institutions will be necessary to sustain the development and investment from both Saskatchewan and out of province sources.

Developing irrigation in Saskatchewan can be the start of a new approach towards rural economic development and diversification in Saskatchewan. In an era of global warming when drought is already a reality for much of the Province the opportunity to irrigate remains. The irrigation infill and expansion projects identified for evaluation can again be truly *transformational* and *visionary* in adapting to the climate, increasing rural incomes and employment and creating an economic platform for decades of sustainable growth.

Saskatchewan leaders and pioneers have over the years had the foresight to dream of a diversified irrigation economy in the dry heartland of the province. Large public investments were made in water storage and some distribution systems with the construction of the Gardiner Dam, the formation of Lake Diefenbaker and the many storage reservoirs across the south. However, the full potential of the sector remains. The Commission of Inquiry into the South Saskatchewan River Project that recommended against the Gardiner Dam in 1952 believed that there would be a time when irrigation could make the project worthwhile.

Today, that time has come. Market conditions, global warming, the continuing need for rural transformation and sustainable agricultural economics provide a clear rationale for investing in the *next Saskatchewan mega project for the 21st Century – comprehensive irrigation development.* The benefits of the development will be found on farms, rural communities, cities and the natural environment. The costs will be remembered as investments with foresight for the next generation of our Saskatchewan children and grandchildren.

The Time Has Come to Irrigate!

