

## **Vagneur: We inadvertently steal our own water from ourselves**

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Spring and water go together like winter and snow. Rafters and kayakers flock to the fast-moving rivers, fishermen eagerly await the latest hatch, little kids play with the yard hose or the puddles left after spring rains, and some folks, like me, start the irrigating season. We mostly flood irrigate, but use sprinklers, as well.

One of life's soul-soothing events is walking a head of water along a high-mountain ditch for the first time in the spring. For starters, there is always something fascinating about how water always takes the line of least resistance, which is especially good knowledge to have later in the summer when trying to hit dry spots with the liquid gold. The part about least resistance also is good to know when making a political speech.

And there's an excitement to it, a feeling of accomplishment while shepherding the life-giving fluid down a slit across the earth, unused for the past six or seven months, knowing the waiting grass or deep-planted seeds will welcome every drop. Once the water reaches the fields, there is no more question as to when the summer season will arrive — it has. Even in the face of May snowstorms.

Usually taken straight from tributaries with a direct link to snowfields not that far away, the water is cold, so very cold, colder than a glass of well-iced water or a lost glove on a high-speed quad chairlift. With waterproof rubber boots, it's not really a problem, but slip on bank-side mud or off a ditch-bottom rock and reactions become almost superhuman as one tries to recover before going completely down. My buddy Ed Pfab reminded me the other day of listening to my string of cuss words as he worked in another field behind a wall of willows. Without seeing the event itself, he knew from experience that I had become totally immersed in my work.

The Italian immigrants from Val D'Aosta, who contributed heavily to the development of agriculture in the Roaring Fork Valley, had grown up with irrigation canals constructed by the Romans and knew a few things about flood irrigation and moving water around the mountains. Their generations-old expertise was well-suited to this valley.

If you haven't noticed, water seems to be a hot topic, especially now that spring has arrived. One of the more recent trains of thought seems to be that agriculture has more water than it needs and surely wastes a lot of what it does have. Apparently, that's low-hanging fruit to those afraid to face the tough issues.

Of course, these thoughts come from people who make a living sorting through law books, engineering tables or otherwise keeping their hands from actually touching the soil. To the uneducated eye, a well-grazed pasture appears over-grazed. To many lawyers, engineers and

naive citizens, flood irrigation is a waste of water. It might be, and then again, maybe it isn't. It depends on circumstances, types of soil, and nuances normally unseen to the non-farmer.

I can only speak from experience in these mountains, but much of the water we take out of the creek runs off the surface and either goes back into the same stream, a different stream, or it blesses a neighbor with its presence. Tailwater, we call it.

Seldom mentioned is the fact that development has, naturally, interrupted this natural downward flow of water, and ditches and culverts put in place over 100 years ago are torn out so that engineers can come up with "hundred-year flood plain" mitigation requirements, sending water once vital to a neighbor either down a storm drain or filtering it out into a barrow pit. Not only does this remove more water from the land, it also adds tens or hundred of thousands of dollars to every development project.

We inadvertently steal our own water from ourselves, sending rainwater down concrete gutters into storm sewers and then we clamor for more irrigation by sprinkler, not thinking that maybe by putting less surface water into the land, we will eventually deplete our groundwater, making water wells less than relevant. And then, while trying to shame legitimate owners of water, such as farmers and ranchers, into being more conservative with their usage of water, we irrigate golf courses in the desert.

Overheard the other night on television from one of the talking heads at the Cato Institute (and he sneaked this in very surreptitiously, so fast I barely had time to hear it): "Farmers are irrigating land they shouldn't be farming."

To which there can only be one cogent response: "If that's true, then farmers are feeding people they shouldn't be feeding."

Water is a complicated issue, and there are no easy answers, but we all need to share in the conversation. In the meantime, Mother Nature and I are doing our parts in keeping the valley green.