



**PARCHED:** Beginning Wednesday, water will once again flow into Owens Valley, which was left dry by diversions to Los Angeles since 1913.  
DAMIAN DOVARGANES/AP/FILE

## After 93 years, L.A. gives its water back

**In what some call the most ambitious US river restoration ever, water will once again flow into the Lower Owens River.**

By [Daniel B. Wood](#) | Staff writer of *The Christian Science Monitor*

**LOS ANGELES** – At a dusty desert ceremony 235 miles north of the city Wednesday, Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa will close a century-long chapter on what may be the biggest water grab in the history of the American West.

Mr. Villaraigosa will push a button to send water flowing down a 62-mile stretch of rocky culverts and scrubland once known as the Lower Owens River. The move effectively turns the clock back to 1913, before city fathers diverted the water that flowed down from the Sierra-Nevada Mountains, and channeled it to Los Angeles. That diversion, orchestrated after years of backroom deals (chronicled in the 1974 classic, "Chinatown"), helped give rise to America's second-largest city. But it turned the mountain-ringed valley into a desert.

Now, several officials call the current effort the most ambitious river restoration ever attempted in the US.

It will create a flowing river through what is now dry land dotted only with tiny pools of runoff. The project comes after decades of animosity between northern and southern California that led to a 1970 court case and a 1997 promise by the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power (LADWP) to return the water by 2003.

After further stalls and fines, a mayoral administration wishing to turn over a new leaf acquiesced to the project.

"The significance of this cannot be overstated," says H. David Nahai, president of the Los Angeles Board of Water and Power Commissioners. "Inyo County gets 62 miles of desert reborn with fish, birds, wildlife, plants, and wetlands, and Los Angeles sees the end of decades of acrimony by doing the right, environmentally responsible thing."

Mr. Nahai says that because four new pumps will then return the redirected water to the L.A. aqueduct after its 62-mile journey, the project will barely affect L.A.'s water supply.

But the new agreement will mean Los Angeles customers will have to find about 9,000 acre feet of water - roughly the needs of 9,000 homes for one year - from other sources, such as the Colorado River, or through better reclamation, reuse, and conservation. But Nahai and other officials say the city has been successful with conservation efforts as a result of public education campaigns, tested during intermittent droughts since the 1980s. Though Los Angeles has added more than 750,000 residents since 1986, it uses the same amount of water today as then.

For Inyo County, however, the change is considered to be dramatic.

"This is definitely an historic turning point for Inyo County that residents have been waiting for for a long time," says Denise Racine of the California Department of Fish and Game. Besides the aesthetic beauty of a flowing

river that attracts anglers, boaters, and swimmers, the river is expected to generate an explosion of plant life that includes banks of new trees.

That, in turn, helps to spur the return of more birds and wildlife, including elk, deer, and wild mink.

"In 10 years this place will be magnificent," says Kathleen New, president of the Lone Pine Chamber of Commerce and a lifelong resident. "This is a very, very big deal for us to know that people will want to come here, spend time and enjoy the beauty."

Some residents, including Ms. New, say the original 1913 land and water grab by LADWP had one positive result: The area was never developed. The county's 18,000 residents live on 1.7 percent of the land. The rest is owned by the state, the federal Bureau of Land Management, or the LADWP. In the early 1900s, city agents posed as farmers and ranchers to buy land and water rights. Later, Los Angeles built pumps and dams to divert the water from local springs and wetlands to Los Angeles.

Local opposition to LADWP water diversions is not limited to the Owens River saga. Beginning in 1939, the LADWP built a tunnel beneath Mono Lake, another pristine, environmental treasure 90 miles north, and began draining it for use in Los Angeles. After 50 years of litigation, the water depletion was halted about a decade ago, and water levels are now close to pre-1939 levels.

"If it weren't for LADWP, we would probably look like Palmdale and other developed cities in the California desert, so I am thankful for that," says New. "But it would be nice to have water."

The water's return will mean beauty and more tourism, the region's primary source of income, she says. But significant new development is not a concern because available land is in short supply.



RICH CLABAUGH - STAFF

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She and others say the river's return will cause confusion and concern for ranchers in the first few years, as the flowing water finds its old river route - now scoured away by wind, rain, and cattle erosion. A number of fish kills is expected in the smallish pools where fish now thrive, as incoming water brings surface sediment.

"The old channel is just dirt, and we are expecting that it will take awhile for the water to find its way," says Doug Daniels, Inyo County program manager for administrative services. Some desert shrubs will die off because of too much water in the groundwater table. But once water is flowing again, officials say, bass, bluegill, and catfish will begin multiplying.

The water is expected to flow at an annual average rate of 40 cubic feet of water per second, with seasonal rushes of up to 200 cubic feet per second. Three weeks ago the LADWP announced a plan to spend \$105 million on berms intended to mitigate dust storms in an area that used to hold the Owens Lake - now a dusty lake bed.

Retired rancher Stan Matlick has complained that it has taken court orders for LADWP to move forward, despite its claims of newfound environmental sensitivity. "It's a good thing, but I'm a bit dubious of how the LADWP will stick to this," says Mr. Matlick.

But most observers say the agreement is a win-win that will serve as a model for other river restoration projects in the West.

"I would call this a long-overdue milestone," says Rita Schmidt Sudman of the Water Education Foundation, a nonprofit in Sacramento, Calif.

"It is very significant for the benefits it is giving both parties here in California, but also in setting the tone for reconciliation among others across the West to not just continue to fight their battles out in court."