



## In Owens Valley, water again flows

With the turn of a knob, Villaraigosa opens the gate of a diversion dam, launching the most ambitious river habitat restoration in the West.

By Louis Sahagun  
Times Staff Writer

December 7, 2006

INDEPENDENCE, CALIF. — Against a backdrop of lofty snowcapped peaks, about 500 spectators, led by Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, gathered Wednesday to watch the Lower Owens River ripple anew with its first surge of High Sierra water in nearly a century.

The largest river habitat restoration effort ever attempted in the West was jump-started at 12:15 p.m., when Villaraigosa turned a control knob to open a new clamshell-shaped steel gate at a diversion dam that has been directing the waters that have flowed into the Los Angeles Aqueduct since 1913.

The event marked a brief detente in historic water wars that have boiled in the Owens Valley since the early 1900s, when Los Angeles city agents posed as ranchers and farmers to buy land and water rights in the valley. Their goal was to build an aqueduct that would help transform Los Angeles into a metropolis.

The stealth and deception became grist for books and movies that portrayed the dark underbelly of Los Angeles' formative years.

Cheers and applause — along with the grinding gears of the steel gate — welcomed the icy, emerald green water that roared into the river channel.

Villaraigosa, smiling broadly, gave a thumbs up.

In an interview moments earlier, the mayor said, "This is a new chapter in our relationship with the Owens Valley. We can't take back what happened here 90 years ago, but we can make it better."

On Nov. 5, 1913, 40,000 people assembled at the southern end of the gravity-powered aqueduct and let out a cheer when the first Owens River water splashed into the San Fernando Valley.

Among them was L.A. water czar William Mulholland, who told the crowd: "There it is! Take it!"

But the engineering marvel that transformed Los Angeles came at a high price for residents of this rugged wide-open territory bisected by U.S. Highway 395.

After the water was diverted into the aqueduct, there was no more for the 62-mile-long Lower Owens River. It also denied water to the river's massive catch basin, Owens Lake, which evaporated into vast salt flats prone to causing choking dust storms.

The Second Los Angeles Aqueduct opened in 1970. Beginning just south of the Owens lakebed and ending 200 miles south in the San Fernando Valley, it added 50% more capacity to the water system.

The two Los Angeles aqueducts deliver about 430 million gallons a day to the city.

After groundwater pumping by the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power between 1970 and 1990 destroyed habitat in the Owens Valley, the department agreed in 1991 to restore the Lower Owens River to compensate for the damage.

Acknowledging that it won't be easy to resolve the bitter feelings of local residents who believe that Los Angeles' unquenchable thirst has taken a heavy toll on their environment, Villaraigosa added: "I understand the cynicism. I'd be cynical too. The people here have heard promises from us in the past, and that part of the reason we are here today is because of a lawsuit."

In 2001, a suit was brought by the California Department of Fish and Game, the California State Lands Commission, the Sierra Club and the Owens Valley Committee, accusing the DWP of deliberately missing deadlines for implementing the plan.

The DWP had missed at least 13 deadlines by last September, when a state Court of Appeal upheld an Inyo County Superior Court order that would ban the city from using the Second Los Angeles Aqueduct if it continued delaying the river restoration project.

Inyo County Judge Lee E. Cooper, who stood next to the mayor at Wednesday's event, also imposed fines of \$5,000 a day until water flowed again in the Lower Owens River at a rate of 40 cubic feet per second.

By today, the DWP will have paid \$2,285,000 in fines.

"I looked for the most painful things I could find to get the job done," Cooper said Wednesday of his ruling.

The Lower Owens River Project, which has cost the city \$39 million to launch, is not expected to result in a significant loss of water or in a rate hike for DWP customers.

A faux pas by Villaraigosa drew laughter during his formal presentation at the river's edge when he called the area the "Sahara." A written statement of his remarks showed he meant to blame Los Angeles for "the environmental degradation of the Eastern Sierra," which is the flank of the mountain range that the water flows from.

By the time Villaraigosa was heading home in a chartered jet after the hourlong ceremony, the water had traveled roughly half a mile, meandering around a bend, past clots of dusty sagebrush.

It will sweep past the skeletal gray arms of dead cottonwood trees, and through dry zones and broad spring-fed beaver ponds choked with cattails and harboring largemouth bass and catfish, which are expected to spawn hordes of fish in the rehabilitated river.

The water will take about 16 days to traverse the vast Owens Valley floodplain flanked by the High Sierra on the west and the White and Inyo mountains on the east, and pour into storage ponds on the northern edge of the dry Owens Lake.

There, four 600-horsepower pumps will draw the water up and put it back into the aqueduct's ribbon of concrete and steel for transport to Los Angeles, about 250 miles to the south.

If all goes according to plan, within five years nature will transform the revived river's lazy loops into an oasis of willows and cottonwood trees; wetlands for waterfowl and shorebirds, and warm water fisheries for bass, catfish, frogs and crayfish.

Local residents hope it will also boost the struggling economies of the small towns dotting the Owens Valley — Bishop, Big Pine, Independence and Lone Pine — with new opportunities for fishing, hunting, hiking and bird watching.

Then there is the kayaking experience that some locals are already calling "the long glide," given that the river will range from 2 to 6 feet in depth, and will be free of rapids, waterfalls and beaver dams.

"Sixty-two more miles of river fisheries and habitat can do great things for us," Inyo County Supervisor Susan Cash said.

Cattle rancher Scott Kemp, who leases 35,000 acres of grazing land from the DWP, would not go that far. "We're not sure what this project is going to do. We're concerned of flooding [grazing land] down around the Lone Pine area."

Michael Prather, leader of a pro-river coalition, believes that restoring the Lower Owens is a test of society's ability to coexist harmoniously with nature in the 21st century.

"There'll be lots of work tomorrow," Prather said. "But today is for the river. Today is for fish. Today is for frogs, and kids who like to catch crayfish."

---

*[louis.sahagun@latimes.com](mailto:louis.sahagun@latimes.com)*