

Missouri River

Missouri National Recreational River



The Pick-Sloan Plan

The Background

Much of the current debate over Missouri River water uses stems from the Flood Control Act of 1944. One component of that piece of legislation is the “Pick-Sloan Plan.”

That the “Big Muddy” flooded annually was a given. Major floods occurred in 1844, 1881, 1903, 1915, 1926, and 1934. They were no novelty to the people living along the Missouri and its tributaries. But the three floods in 1943 were unusually severe. Much of Omaha was under water, including its airport,



vital to the war effort. That year’s flooding focused unprecedented public and congressional attention on the Missouri River basin. Congress responded a year later by passing the Flood Control Act. This law became the guiding spirit of the Missouri River basin and has resulted in the most important and lasting alteration of the basin and its ecosystem.

While devastating floods paved the way for the Pick-Sloan Plan so too did the Great Depression and the progressive conservation movement’s belief that multiple-purpose water projects would stimulate growth in the arid West. Proponents fervently believed that growth would follow the “harnessing” of rivers. Pick-Sloan also reflected the arid lands reclamation movement, which was promoted at the turn of the last century by irrigation enthusiasts like George Maxwell and William Smythe.

Unsustainable agricultural practices on the Great Plains, an economic depression, and the prolonged drought in the 1930s that created the Dust Bowl focused the Department of the Interior’s Bureau of Reclamation’s (BOR) attention on more storage and irrigation opportunities in the basin. Bureau engineers developed plans for large-scale water development projects throughout the basin. Not only would the projects increase the extent of agriculture they would also provide construction jobs for thousands of basin residents.

With the onset of the 1930s drought, it became apparent that not even the Bureau-proposed dams would provide enough water in the Missouri to maintain a six-foot deep navigation channel from Sioux City, Iowa, to the mouth. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers proposed in 1932 to build a major dam at Fort Peck,



Montana. This dam would store water that could be released to supplement flows in the river below Sioux City and keep barges afloat. Less than four months after Congress in 1933 passed the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA), President Roosevelt directed construction of this huge earthen dam. The Corps completed it in 1939.

The Pick Plan

The Pick Plan was a direct response to the severe floods of 1943. That year, motivated by flood damage, the House Committee on Flood Control authorized the Corps of Engineers to produce a plan for flood control and other purposes in the Missouri River basin. In charge

of preparing these plans was Colonel Lewis A. Pick, then division engineer in the Corps’ Omaha, Nebraska, office. Pick



reviewed previous Corps flood-control plans and his agency’s huge 1935 report and, in ninety days, submitted to the Chief of Engineers in Washington a twelve and one-half page plan. Extremely brief as Corps engineers’ reports go, it was terse and concise to the point of bareness. Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson submitted the Corps plan to the House Committee on Flood Control on March 2, 1944.

The plan’s major provisions called for five dams on the Missouri River below Fort Peck, new and previously authorized but unbuilt reservoirs on tributaries, and 1,500 miles of levees on both sides of the river from Sioux City, Iowa, to the confluence with the Mississippi River where no federal levees had been built before. Essentially a flood control and navigation plan, Colonel Pick allowed for some hydroelectric power production at major dams. He barely mentioned irrigation. Cost for the total package he estimated at \$490 million. Pick maintained that his plan would provide for all uses of the river’s water, “including irrigation, navigation, power, domestic and sanitary purposes, wildlife, and recreation.”

Submission of the Pick Plan to Congress was the first salvo in the now long-running debate between upper and lower basin interests.

The Sloan Plan

The Bureau had been conducting an extensive multi-year study of the basin's water needs with the intent to complete a comprehensive plan by 1945. Caught completely off guard by the Pick Plan, the Bureau ordered a speedy completion of its plan,



under the direction of William G. Sloan, then Assistant Director in the Billings, Montana, office. This document was far more detailed and specific than the army plan. In his 211-page report, Sloan emphasized irrigation and reclamation as well as hydroelectric power generation. He called for some seventeen power plants, ninety reservoirs—nearly four times as many as Pick's—and the irrigation of nearly 5 million acres of the Great Plains. Its price tag, twice the cost of Pick's, startled Congress and the public when it became known: \$1.26 billion. And this in 1944! Secretary of the Interior Harold Ikes submitted the Bureau's plan to the Senate Committee on Commerce on May 5, 1944.

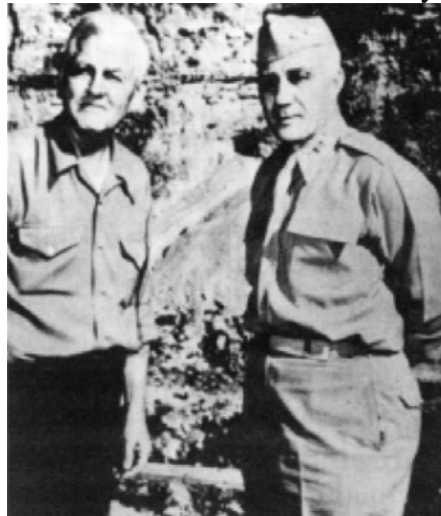
The Debate

Both the Bureau and the Corps knew of each other's activities and differences of views on basin development, yet each agency went its own way and issued its respective report without regard to the other. While each side sought control over the "Big Muddy," the two plans hopelessly conflicted. The Bureau snickered at the Corps' promise of navigation. The Corps mocked irrigating the northern reaches of the American desert. Each agency lobbied and worked hard to promote its respective plan—and have Congress eventually approve it. Each plan enjoyed the

support of an influential lobby in Washington, D.C.; each plan garnered backing by various regional interests within the basin.

Both Congress and the basin's print media hotly debated the merits and failings of the two plans. The upper basin states of Montana, Wyoming and North Dakota favored the Sloan Plan, while the lower basin states, including South Dakota, advocated the Pick Plan. (South Dakota, however, later switched sides.)

A photo showing the two principals belies the fact Colonel Pick and William Sloan intensely



disliked each other. Pick regarded Sloan as barely his equal. Sloan was easygoing; Pick at times cocky.

The Compromise

Congress received the two plans at the time it was considering legislation to create a Missouri River Authority (similar to the Tennessee Valley Authority and preferred by President Roosevelt). Both the Corps and the Bureau saw the Authority as a threat to its respective interests and hated it. No matter how much the two federal agencies disliked each other, they hated the idea of another public corporation even more. Political expediency and a request from the president for the two agencies to develop a unified plan produced the eventual compromise.

The similarities between the two plans enabled General R. C. Crawford (Col. Pick having meanwhile been assigned to Burma) and William Sloan and another representative from each

agency to meet in Omaha on October 16 and 17, 1944, to discuss the plans, and to issue a "joint engineering report"—the Pick-Sloan Plan. Simply put, they agreed to build the projects proposed by each agency regardless how worthless those projects seemed just a few months or even days before. Congress ratified the short two-



page Omaha agreement in the Flood Control Act of 1944. James Patton, President of the National Farmers Union (it supported a Missouri Valley Authority), called the Corps-bureau compromise "a shameful, loveless shotgun wedding." Congress settled the jurisdiction of the two agencies: the Corps would build and operate all the main-stem dams—even the one at Gavins Point which the Bureau had so strenuously opposed—and the Bureau would allocate the water dedicated to irrigation.

While most basin residents welcomed the Pick-Sloan Plan, not everyone did. American Indians, those whose reservations bordered the river, particularly opposed it. They were the biggest losers. The reservoirs flooded their best agricultural and grazing lands and displaced hundreds of families. Most affected by the Pick-Sloan Plan, they reaped the least benefit from it.

The chain of Missouri River reservoirs and dams from Montana to South Dakota is one of the nation's engineering marvels. Pick-Sloan reflected the prevailing certainty in large technological projects to sustain and support regional development in areas not favored by climate and geography. The dams and reservoirs have only partially fulfilled their promise—hence the continuing tension in the Missouri River basin.

