

10 December 1971

Senator Joseph M. Montoya
Senate Office Building
Washington, D. C.

Dear Senator Montoya:

I am writing to enlist your assistance in halting continuation of a project undertaken by the Bureau of Reclamation, which is causing economic loss to property owners and irreversible injury to the ecological balance in New Mexico. The Bureau has announced a program for the elimination of trees (phreatophytes) along the banks of the Rio Grande, ostensibly to conserve water for agricultural purposes. The claim is made that transpired water conserved by removing vegetation will become available for irrigation. No adequate studies have been carried out to substantiate this claim, and no information is available to support the contention that more water will be available for agriculture. The increase in evaporation caused by the removal of vegetation has not been taken into account. Nor has consideration been given to the destruction of other resources consequent to this program such as the loss of wildlife, the reduction of aesthetic values, the disruption of riverine culture, and, far from least of all, deterioration of the quality of life in New Mexico, so dependent as this arid state is on the beauty that river valley trees add to the landscape.

The mentality of the Bureau of Reclamation engineers is beyond my comprehension unless it finds explanation in arrogant self-interest of a bureaucratic organization. Is this program not just another scheme to keep bureau employees in business? It has been dreamed up either as a means for spending the Bureau's present appropriation as it runs out of more justifiable expenditures, or as an argument to convince Congress of the need for future budgetary increases. When a government agency loses perspective on its function to serve the best interests of the public and devotes its planning and energies to self-perpetuation the time has come for its abolition.

An episode occurred a few weeks ago in southern New Mexico involving actions by the Bureau of Reclamation which dramatize incontrovertably the inexcusable arrogance of agency personnel. A ranch on the Rio Grande near San Acacio was sprayed with Silvex - trichlorophenoxy propionic acid, 2,4,5-TP, a compound closely related to the defoliants used in Vietnam - to kill the trees along the river as part of the so called water conservation program. The spraying was undertaken without warning to or permission of the ranch owner, and apparently without knowledge by the Bureau or the people involved in the action, of the lethal threat the hydrocarbon posed to animals and men. Moreover, an appalling sequel to the use of these compounds as defoliants was brought to light by a committee of the A.A.A.S. sent to Vietnam to investigate the

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effect they produced on the ecology of that country. The committee reported that a more serious consequence, transcending long-lasting ecological disruption, was to cause thalidomide-like mammalian birth defects. The immediate result of the spraying in San Acacio was the death of many of the rancher's cattle, the rendering of the survivors unmarketable, and the bankruptcy of their owner.

The Bureau tried to disclaim any responsibility for the ill effects of the spraying, maintaining that Silvex was non-toxic to animals. It attempted to shift the blame to poisonous weeds which would have had to appear on the ranch simultaneously with the application of Silvex, and indeed it was at that time that the vegetation became poisonous due to its contamination with Silvex.

A Federal Bureau which conducts its affairs with such ignorance, incompetence, cynicism, and arrogance towards the public it was created to serve should be called to account for its actions, and the responsible employees if not dismissed from their jobs should at least be publicly reprimanded. And recompense for the loss suffered by the individuals innocently affected should promptly be paid.

These people are your constituents and as such have every right to look to you for help in obtaining payment for the damages they have sustained. This state is your baili-wick where you represent their interests before the power of the Federal Government and are in a position to influence the change in policy necessary to halt an ill-conceived program and to prevent the further occurrence of official malfeasance.

Respectfully yours,