

Native America Calling Radio Interview

June 7, 2012

[opening music]

Tara Gatewood: Welcome to Native America Calling. From Studio 49 in Albuquerque I'm Tara Gatewood. Water is undoubtedly a major issue in Indian country. It is the center of many discussions going on right now in many tribal and urban communities. As the nation continues to focus on water one man of native ancestry sits at one of the intersections where government and water meet.

Michael Connor, Commissioner of the Bureau of Reclamation is charged with making decisions over water management for the country. Join us as we learn more of his story as our "Native in the Spotlight" next on Native America Calling right after National Native News.

Tara: This is the Thursday, June 7th edition of Native American Calling. I'm your host Tara Gatewood. Today I want to start with some water stats. Now, these are approximated from several sources, so the numbers are broad estimates, but they help form a larger picture.

Did you know that we, as adults, are about 60 percent water, or as newborn infants, hit around 80 percent. It's also said that the brain is composed of about 70 percent water and the lungs about 90 percent water, with our blood coming in just over 80 percent. As you are hearing, we are pretty much water. Which makes the statement "water is life" even more evident.

What about when it comes to the water flowing through the United States and through our tribal nations? How important is water when you think of it in those contexts? Have you ever wondered how decisions on water management for the country are made?

While one federal agency called the Bureau of Reclamation sits at the helm of where, what their website says, manages, develops and protects water and related resources in an environmentally and economically sound manner in the interest of the American public.

This bureau is also the nation's largest wholesale water supplier, operating 348 reservoirs, with a total storage capacity of 245 million acre-feet. It also provides one out of five western farmers with irrigation water for 10 million farmland acres that produce some 60 percent of the nation's vegetables and one-quarter of its fresh fruit and nut crops.

It's also the second largest producer of hydro power in the United States, operating 58 hydroelectric power plants that annually produce on an average 40 billion kilowatt hours. It's been happening for the last 10 years that way.

Not only does this bureau oversee the country it also has a tie to tribal nations. That's where we pick up today as we throw the spotlight on one native man with native ancestry to learn more about how his work and the intersection where government and the waters meet and how it works.

We invite you to join the conversation. The phone lines are open. The number is 1-800-996-2848. That's also 1-800-99-NATIVE.

I'd like to go ahead and welcome our guest today. Joining us from Washington DC is Michael Connor. He was confirmed Commissioner of the Bureau of Reclamation by the United States on May 21st 2009. Mr. Connor has more than 15 years of experience in the public sector, including having served as counsel to the U.S. Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee since May of 2001.

At the committee he managed legislation for, both, Bureau of Reclamation and the U.S. Geological Survey, and also developed water resource legislation handled with Native American issues.

He also served at the Department of Interior, including his term as deputy director and then director of the Secretary's Indian Water Rights Office. Commissioner Connor is of Taos Pueblo ancestry.

Welcome to Native America Calling, Commissioner Connor.

Michael Connor: Hi Tara. Thank you very much for having me on.

Tara: Wow, it's great to have a discussion. In this time many people are focused on water and the process and how it breaks down into the individual. We appreciate you making some time for us today. I just want to start, how did you get involved with water? I know it's a detailed story but where did it all start for you do you believe?

Michael: Well, I think I was very lucky to end up where I've been over the last several years in dealing with water issues. Given their importance and how much I enjoy working on these issues and how ultimately, if we're successful, we can help people in their daily lives. For me, I started as an engineer. I'm a New Mexican. I grew up in Las Cruces, south of where you are. I went to New Mexico State, got an engineering degree, went out to work in the industry for a while, but was more and more interested in some of the public issues going on.

I was living in Colorado at the time. I went back to law school, given my interest and how they were changing, at the University of Colorado under the great leadership of folks like David Getches, Charles Wilkinson and others. I just had a terrific natural resources law program that I specialized in. From that I got interested in, particularly, Native American issues.

I was lucky enough, when I came out of the University of Colorado, to get a job in the solicitor's office at the Department of Interior. I ended up specializing in Indian water rights issues. This was something like 1993. In '97 I managed to come back to Albuquerque and work in the regional solicitor's office for a couple of years there.

I continued to work on a lot of water issues and the water rights settlement negotiations going on in the state of New Mexico. Then I got asked to come back to DC after two years in Albuquerque.

That was supposed to be the big move west never to return to Washington. But I came back here in the end of '98. I ended up running the Indian Water Rights office for Secretary Babbitt at the end of the Clinton administration. I continued that in the early 2001.

Then I was incredibly fortunate to have Senator Bingaman from New Mexico, who has been the ranking member of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee and now chairman of the committee. Senator Bingaman really wanted to bolster the committee's work in the area of water resources knowing how important it was to the state New Mexico.

For eight years, 2001 until I got confirmed as the Reclamation Commissioner I had the luxury of just working on water and energy issues on a daily basis for somebody as steeped in the issue as Jeff Bingaman is and trying to make progress.

From there I got to know then Senator Ken Salazar, who, as you know, became Secretary of the Interior. I was fortunate enough that he asked me to come and run the Bureau of Reclamation. So here I am.

Tara: Water, just even by nature and your connection to where your story starts from, water has been on the issue and probably in your ears as you've moved about just being a young man in New Mexico all the way to your path there to DC. Have you at any time ever thought of, we read some statistics of where the water lies in your own body, have you ever thought of that, of how close just as human beings we are to water?

Michael: Absolutely. But it's probably been something that, as you noted, recognizing the importance of water growing up in arid New Mexico. We happened to live, really, about 100 feet, my parents now live about 100 feet from one of the reclamation irrigation canals down in the Mesilla valley. I've always recognized the importance, but the statistics you mentioned I thought that was a great way to start off the show, the importance of water to the human body. And really bringing meaning to the phrase "Water is life" or "Water is our lifeblood" in the west.

I think there's nothing like having a career in these issues, particularly, I've been fortunate enough to have a career in certain public policy level capacities. Having to get out on the ground and really recognize the differences between those areas of the country that have plentiful supplies of water and those, such as tribal nations, who haven't had access and the luxury of having that access to water and seeing the impact of poor water quality conditions or the lack of water completely.

And having that overall perspective of the haves and have nots, I think, has really changed my perceptions about what we're trying to do here in the water business.

Tara: And I'm sure that your definition and how and where water touches lives has expanded over the years, but I want to take us back to a time, and you probably hear this date over and over, and maybe even pin it as you're explaining water issues when it comes to Indian country. January 6th, 1908. The U.S. Supreme Court case of *Winters versus the U.S.* You know, just for our listeners, because I know a lot of times when people start learning about water issues with Indian country, it's a good place to start, to backtrack and see where we've come and how much further we need to go. Anything you want to educate our audience about how that decision, the *Winters* decision, as a lot of people will call it, has really influenced your work?

Michael: It's greatly influenced my work and the work of the Bureau of Reclamation and those folks on Capitol Hill. You're absolutely correct. That's the starting point. The *Winters* doctrine, as it's become known, was a Supreme Court decision back in 1908. It really established the fundamental legal principal that Indian tribes have superior rights to the water necessary to fulfill the purposes of the reservations that they now reside on, as of the date of the reservation, whether it be a congressionally enacted reservation or even one set aside by executive action, as many were in the 19th century.

The question...That was incredibly significant as to how that doctrine then fits in, particularly out in the west where most reservations are, how that fits into the traditional water rights system that exists in the western states. It certainly created a level of uncertainty for other water users, given the potential magnitude and the seniority of tribal rights.

But quite frankly, over the last 100 plus years now, people have just really struggled in figuring out the specifics of what that means, as far as the quantity of water, how to adjudicate those rights, and then, of course, the most significant issue is how the tribes actually get the opportunity to put those water rights to use to benefit their people.

Over the last 100 plus years, we've struggled to figure out the specific details of what the Winters doctrine means to both tribal communities and nontribal communities. I think there's been a...certainly support and a growing attention that maybe resolving these claims through negotiation is a better way than simply going through the court system and adjudicating these rights.

First of all, the adjudication process in the many different courts that they've had cases seem to come up with not necessarily all the same interpretation of the Winters doctrine, which certainly leads to more uncertainty rather than less uncertainty.

Adjudication of the rights specifically, no matter how beneficial the recognition of claims, doesn't necessarily help tribes put that water to use and address some of the serious issues that exist in Indian country these days. And it still leaves some uncertainty for other water users.

And so, I think more and more there's interest...Certainly, there's been a lot of success over the last decade, particularly the last three years during the Obama administration under Secretary Salazar's leadership, in moving a lot of settlements forward, demonstrating how they can benefit individuals within Indian country, and being a better solution to a lot of water resource issues than the adjudication process.

Tara: And often the issue is about how and where to get the water to benefit both the Indian communities for which it's reserved without severely affecting the water rights. And also the other people who are using it for their own purposes. The work that you're doing...How does the work that you're doing fit into that paradigm?

Michael: It fits into...Once again, you've described perfectly the balance of a successful negotiation and settlement is to ensure water supplies for tribal communities, not just now, but the thing that really...I'm well aware of, having worked in this area for a long time, is how far out tribal leaders look in trying to secure water supplies. Certainly multi, multi generations out in the future to ensure the long term stability of water resources for the tribe. You've got to ensure that that's part of the settlement. That's certainly what the tribes need, and the nonusers, and the states are looking for some protection of existing uses. It's that balance that we strike to help resolve at the Bureau of Reclamation.

We do it through a number of ways. I think, first of all, in lot of situations there has been a recognition because of the claims that exist by many tribes and these adjudications. There has been water supplies, even within our Bureau of Reclamation projects or that have been laid claim to within the state process that have been not allocated and available for allocation to help provide water for tribal communities.

And so, there's water that we've made available from some of our projects and water supplies. Certainly the Navajo San Juan settlement, some of that water's available from the Navajo reservoir. The settlements that we've had in northern New Mexico rely, to some extent, on San Juan Channel water, as well as the local supplies flowing through the reservation. The same thing up in Montana with the Crow tribe.

We've got the significant amount of water out of our reservoirs behind Yellowtail Dam that's been made available. There's the availability of water supplies and the infrastructure necessary to deliver that water. And certainly some of those supplies don't come at the expense of any other water users. They've been set aside and available for these purposes.

I think, also, where there are not readily available water supplies, there has been an opportunity to engage in better water management, to do conservation, to allow the fulfillment of certain needs within aerated agriculture within reservations, maybe accomplishing the same amount of irrigation with less water through conservation efforts. That's helped take the strain off of other communities.

We've been as creative as treating water coming out of water treatment facilities and providing that for some other communities while tribes have accessed other in river supplies as a way to strike that right balance. There's a lot of different creative ways. Some of these settlements, such as the large settlement involving the Navajo Nation with the San Juan River, are a combination of all of the above, quite frankly, to make those negotiations work.

And so, we have obviously executed at the Bureau of Reclamation programs that do that. It's very rewarding now that we've turned more and more of our attention to Indian country and being able to be involved in these negotiations, offer up some of these creative ideas and these supplies and the use of our infrastructure to help resolve some of these claims and bring some certainty and reliability for folks.

Tara: And some of that commitment is coming down from the administration, that this push to hear tribes more. Tell me more about that.

Michael: Well, yes. It's been wonderful for me, personally, to work in the Obama administration, given the strong commitment to Native Americans across the board in all different areas, particularly in the area of resolving these claims and the uncertainty inherent in water use and needs. There's a strong recognition that it's not just basic health. That certainly is one of the reasons for supporting Indian water right settlements, is the health improvements that we would expect to see in tribal communities. It's also recognition of the economic importance of having access to reliable and clean water supplies and foundation that that is for future economic activity.

It's also a commitment to turning around, I think, what is well recognized as a history of unfulfilled promises between the federal government and native communities. And so, there's been a large focus, and certainly Secretary Salazar tells the story about him agreeing to come over and serve in the administration as Secretary of the Interior.

One of the things that he and the president talked about was his commitment to trying to address some of these historic unfulfilled promises, to change the relationship in many different areas with Native Americans and our very active Indian water rights settlement program.

The administration's very significant involvement in the negotiation process and then support for legislation to authorize and implement these settlements has been, I think, unprecedented, quite frankly, at the level that we've had. Six Indian water rights settlements.

The president, when he...Within a couple of months of coming into office, in March 2009 signed the Public Law 111-11 with two Indian water rights settlements as part of that, one of them being the Navajo Nation San Juan River settlement in New Mexico and the Duck Valley Indian water rights settlement in Nevada.

And so, at that point in time, the president really made a strong statement of the need to ensure clean and reliable water supplies in Indian country and his commitment to doing that. That's a commitment that we've all tried to live up to and bring to fruition.

Tara: OK, let me give out the phone number again. If you just joined our conversation, today is our June Native in the Spotlight. We are connecting to Washington D.C. today. We're visiting with Michael Connor, who is the commissioner of the Bureau of Reclamation, which makes a lot of the water decisions that are connected to our own tribal communities. We have him on the line. If you wanted to share any comments or have any questions directly for him, or if you just wanted to share how important water is to you and your tribal community, our phone lines are open. We want you to call. The number is 1-800-996-2848. That's also 1-800-99 NATIVE.

When it comes to some of the decisions that your tribe has made over water rights issues or maybe are in the middle of, or if you have any specific questions to get a better understanding of how the process works we invite you to give us a call. Again, that number, 1-800-996-2848, which is also 1-800-99 NATIVE.

With the different water issues that are going on in Indian country, there have been settlements that are bringing access to water throughout the country. There's also items that are making people redefine their connection to water. We also want to hear about that. If you would like to connect with Commissioner Connor, the phone lines are open. Again, we invite you to give us a call. The number, 1-800-996-2848.

Commissioner Connor, the word is out that government has it on the mind to send the word out that government is changing. I want to get some more thoughts on that. In a speech that you gave in 2011 with the Western States Water Council.

But before we do, let me give out that number. We'll be back with Commissioner Connor. The number, 1-800-996-2848. That's also 1-800-99 NATIVE. Our phone lines are open and we are ready to take your calls, so pick up the phone and give us a call. We'll be right back.

Tara: Welcome back to Native America Calling. I'm Tara Gatewood from Isleta Pueblo. I'd like to take a moment to say hello to a few of our affiliate stations like Main FM in Ashville, North Carolina, KHEW in Rocky Boy, Montana, and also WGZS in Cloquet, Minnesota, and of course hello to our listeners who are tuned into us via the Internet on Native Voice One. Today is our June Native in the Spotlight. We are talking with a gentleman who is connected to water and the country. We have our phone lines open. We are visiting with Michael Connor. He is the Commissioner of the Bureau of Reclamation. He has also served for several decades in water issue areas with the Department of the Interior. And also, his work working with the Secretary's Indian Water Rights Office.

Our phone lines are open. If you have a comment or question for Mr. Connor we invite you to give us a call. The number is 1-800-996-2848. I'd like to go ahead and welcome back our spotlight, Mr. Michael Connor. And again, like I said, he is the Commissioner of the Bureau of Reclamation and is of Taos Pueblo ancestry.

Welcome back to Native America Calling, Michael.

Michael: Thank you again for having me.

Tara: We've got a caller on the line. Let's go ahead and bring them in. Again, if you'd like to join the conversation, the number is 1-800-996-2848. I'd like to bring in Derek, who is in San Dia, New Mexico listening to us on KUNM. You're on air, Derek.

Derek Lente: Good morning everyone. How is everyone doing today?

Tara: We're doing well. What's on your mind today?

Derek: This is more of just a comment for Commissioner Connor. This is Derek Lente out in San Dia Pueblo, but I just wanted to compliment Commissioner Connor on him being such a great advocate for Indian water rights, I guess specifically more so Pueblo water rights. I've been working on Pueblo water rights here in the middle part of New Mexico since the late '90s and certainly he's been somebody inspiring to work with. I just want to congratulate him and tell him how much I appreciate working with him on these really important water issues.

Tara: And Derek, for you, seeing the work that Commissioner Connor has done, are there any particulars that you know maybe, maybe not, maybe wouldn't have happened if such a person wasn't in this position?

Derek: I think simply the recognition that Pueblos or tribes in general certainly have a voice and an opinion, and any decision that's made by the federal government, for instance, will certainly have an impact on the people that are on the ground to...that are going to affect them for the rest of their lives. And so, that being said, anything that's going to happen from now on, because the future...And Mr. Connor, or Commissioner Connor, has been certainly aware of those issues.

Tara: Oh, those cell phones. Well Derek, we do appreciate your call there in San Dia on the line. Let's go ahead and keep the phone lines rolling. Again, if you'd like to join the conversation the number is 1-800-996-2848. Give us a call. Let's go ahead and bring in Lee, who is in Round Valley, California listening to us on KYBU. You're on air, Lee.

Lee: Thank you. It's really a pleasure to speak with you, Tara and Commissioner Connor. I've got just an interesting situation here I'd like your comment on, if I could. I'm the manager of our water district in Round Valley. It's a county water district under the state water board. If you're aware of AB-3030, it's the groundwater management act, our water district, which is non-tribal but covers a large tribal area, the Round Valley tribes, decided to put together a groundwater management plan with the cooperation of the tribe. Without it, we decided not to do it.

So we went to the tribe and spoke about the management plan. What it does is it sets up a method the state approved for coming up with basin management objectives. We're in a big, round basin aquifer here. It's a beautiful aquifer that we all share.

What the objectives in place, agreed to by the community, the state would support any actions necessary during times of crisis. The tribe agreed to go along with it. It gave them a window into the ranching community and all that's going on. There would be a stakeholders group in which they would be a major stakeholder. And, as well, we would have an eye into their community, their water systems, and how that affects the aquifer, if at all.

Everything went fine. They agreed. We worked with Natural Resources for a number of months. And then they sent us a letter saying that they'd like us to stop working on the plan, which we agreed to do if they wanted us to. And that, until such a time that they completed a plan of their own, a study of their own. We did agree to stop.

But mentioned in that letter was rather strong litigation possibilities if we didn't stop and mention of the winter stock trim. We studied that and I believe I wrote back that this was a great opportunity for us to include those principles as one of our, or if not a major basin management objective, to be able to supply first rights water to the tribe at times of drought.

It could be determined in the plan. For instance, say wells at a certain depth period of 50 feet were running dry during a time of drought. That would be a time, say, to take action.

Anyway, that is where we stand now. We've stopped. I haven't heard back from the tribe in a number of months. We've stopped our work. We have two years to sit in a holding pattern and then the plan comes to a complete halt and then there's a year waiting period before it can be started up again.

But I'd like your comment about negotiation is really the way to do this, not adjudication. That's been my

[00:37:56] all along. Thank you for hearing me out. I'll take your comment with pleasure.

Tara: OK, thanks for your call, Lee. Michael.

Michael: Sure. I guess my immediate reaction to the situation that Lee was describing is that in all of the success stories that I talked about where we have had successful negotiations I can guarantee that somewhere in the process there were some fits and starts and some halts to what ended up being very constructive discussions. My sense is, and I think every negotiation is unique, but at some point in time I think tribes obviously feel the need to assess where they might be headed to in agreeing to an allocation of a scarce resource and how that fits in with their legal rights. It sounds like the tribe is taking some time to do that.

And then, I think that going through that process then hopefully the best thing, from my perspective at least, is to get back to the table. You sound like a very willing negotiator or somebody willing to problem solve in an open process with the tribe. I think that's ultimately going to lead to productive discussions and hopefully an allocation or agreement that everybody's comfortable with.

I would also just say I couldn't help but just go back to the comments of my friend Derek Lente. In any situation in which we've been successful, it certainly hasn't been the Bureau of Reclamation. In fact, usually we're trying to keep up with the great leadership at the tribal and local level.

We're involved in some situations right now in the Middle Rio Grand where Derek, he's a great young tribal leader, is exercising that foresight and hopefully we'll be successful in dealing with issues there. I think that's what it takes in all of these negotiations or interactions within the tribe, as well as with the tribes and their neighbors and the federal and state agencies that are involved.

I appreciate his comments. I just wanted to point out that those folks external to federal government are the ones that really move this process along.

Tara: OK, Lee. Thanks for your call there in Round Valley. And you know, when we do talk about our water, this issue of litigation versus negotiation comes up. And in fact, after one of the oversight hearings that happened this spring, it led us into a discussion of tribes and how they're making decisions over their water.

There are some tribes where doing negotiation is the way, but there are also other tribes who just want to take a different process. You have different communities where it's also creating controversy on decisions over how water will be used, utilized, and accessed.

Anything you want to add about some of these issues that are out there that are causing conflict within their own tribal community when tribes are making the decision? They want to make negotiations as opposed to going into the litigation process?

Michael: I recognize that a lot of situations when there's a negotiated agreement that provides a certain amount of water...I guess I understand, in many situations that we've been involved in just recently, whether it be the Crow Settlement in Montana, the Navajo Settlement in New Mexico, the [00:41:43] Settlement involving four Pueblos.

And even some unresolved issues like the Navajo/Hopi discussion involving the Little Colorado River in Arizona that there is skepticism from some tribal members that doubt whether the settlements are in the best interest of the tribe in the long term.

I guess my sense is that I think the tribes have done a very good job, the ones that I've been involved in, of really assessing the validity of their claims, the strength of their claims. That's a better way to put it. They're all valid, but the strength of their claims, the ability to get water to the people, and then have negotiated from that perspective.

I think where I've seen it be very effective, and I think, having witnessed this particularly on the Crow Reservation, a very aggressive education program from the tribal leadership to tribal members, an open process, a lot of public meetings to describe the nature of the agreement, the details of the agreement, why it's viewed as being in the best interest of the tribe is always very helpful to the process.

I think that's one situation where I witnessed a strong movement of people ultimately supporting that settlement and thinking that that was a very good agreement based on that very in depth education process.

And so, I know that's not going to put all of the controversy or ongoing concerns with everybody...I think that's the nature of the water business in general, that if you can create a consensus among a diverse number of folks, then that's probably going to be a majority of those different entities. That's probably going to be the best you're going to get.

I think, overall, 100 percent agreement is just never going to happen in the water business, but I think reliance on fact, being willing to discuss those in a public and transparent way, I think always helps the process move forward.

Tara: I'm glad you brought up the Navajo Nation because, as referring to some of the controversy going on there in that community, also just a week ago there was another movement, in terms of the chapter of water on the Navajo Nation, bringing more water to Gallup Navajo area, and also parts of Jicarilla. Anything you want to add, how what you witnessed and participated in a week ago, with the opening or the groundbreaking, that really mirrors what water issues and the possibilities of your department that it brings to tribal communities?

Michael: Oh, absolutely. Last Saturday I participated with Secretary Salazar...this was last Saturday, on June second, with Secretary Salazar, Senator Bingaman, Senator Udall, and a number of other dignitaries in New Mexico, in the groundbreaking ceremony for the first phase of the Navajo-Gallup Water Supply Project, which is really the centerpiece of the Navajo-San

Juan agreement. It was a situation or an event that really was a celebration, taking things from the agreement phase to the congressional process, to doing the environmental work that we had to do, ultimately to breaking ground and starting to lay pipe and starting to put the water infrastructure in place that's going to deliver water to people who haven't had running water, is just very rewarding.

And what was most rewarding for me, who had, in these various capacities I've had over the last decade, been part of the discussions and activities leading up to Saturday's event, is just how close the different communities were.

Certainly, there was strong support throughout the Navajo Nation and its leadership, from the executive branch and its council, and the community chapter leaders who are going to be benefiting from this. And I think they've come to see that, as I mentioned on Saturday, this project is not going to be part of that history of unfulfilled promises.

We're going to get this thing done. And we have resources in hand right now to do construction, to sustain it over many years, and there's a strong commitment from the administration, and recognizing that, people not seeing this as just the promise of water and prosperity, hopefully, but the actuality of it.

The other communities, the Jicarilla Apache Nation, their leadership were there celebrating with the Navajo in the city of Gallup, and its leadership, both in the legislature from around that area and the mayor, were there, and the state of New Mexico has been a great partner in this effort all along.

And so it was a celebration not just for the Navajo Nation but for all those communities who have been through a difficult negotiating process but who are now completely invested in the partnership they have, and it's our responsibility to make that a reality, that the benefits that they hoped for and that they set aside historic disagreements to overcome, that we make good on that infrastructure.

Tara: And that kind of goes in line with the speech I was referring to before the break, your 2011 speech, and talking about carrying on the mission, putting aside some of the rulebooks and making sure that the issue is ahead. One of the quotes: "We're going to try and come in under budget and ahead of schedule." And so I hear the tone of wanting to present that with your work, that government is changing and that that commitment is there. You talk about Indian country and the federal government, and you'll get tons of people who come in opposition because the federal government has had its history with tribes, and there is a lot of mistrust.

And moving into this era to get tribal nations, down to the individual, who sees where the water is and how it's working, how can those people understand the federal government's commitment to make this change?

Michael: My own assessment of that, of how to bring people from viewing us skeptically to viewing us as wanting to be partners and improve things on the ground, is simply to produce. And as you mentioned, that was part of the speech I gave at the Western States Water Council, NARF talk last year. We have a great opportunity, through these recent settlements and having resources in hand, our goal at the Bureau of Reclamation now...resources because, not only through our budget requests and the appropriations we've been provided, but Congress has been seeing the issues associated with not having the resources to build some of these projects and have done a very good job in giving us what we call "mandatory funds" that we have access to.

And we don't have all the funds that we need, so that's still going to be something we have to work through in our budgets. But we have a substantial amount of funding right now, in hand, to move forward with these various settlements, whether they be in Arizona, New Mexico, Montana.

And so it's our responsibility to work expeditiously to bring those benefits to Indian country and their neighbors as quickly as possible to help provide that certainty and ultimately get to the place where we're delivering water and promoting prosperity in Indian country. And the only way we're going to do that is to move through our legal requirements.

We don't want to shortcut those, but we want to move through them as expeditiously as possible, cut the red tape, and get action on the ground and start employing people in Indian country, because these projects are going to have significant immediate economic benefits because they're large construction projects that are going to employ people in Indian country and then, once completed, will have long-term value from the investments being made.

Just on the "cutting the red tape" thing, I just wanted to highlight, and this was spoken to a great deal by Secretary Salazar on Saturday, was that out of all the projects the federal government is involved in, the White House has identified 14 high-priority infrastructure projects that it intends to cut red tape to move forward on permitting decisions as quickly as possible.

The Navajo-Gallup Water Supply Project is one of those 14, and it's already helped us better coordinate ourselves to get some of the work we need on the ground, rights of way, those type of things, permits, approvals, to move forward so that we can break ground on Saturday.

Tara: And if somebody wanted to learn more information about the work you're doing or the bureau that you're connected to, what's the best place they can go to learn?

Michael: Well, certainly our website, www.usbr.gov. We try and highlight all these programs that we're involved in, particularly the work that we're doing on Indian water-rights settlements. I think there's various links to talk about the high-priority infrastructure project. And that's certainly a starting point, and then there's a number of contacts in each of our regional offices that can be accessed for more specific information, and we'd love to hear from the public and provide more information and let people know what we're doing.

Tara: OK. I want to squeeze in a comment. A caller couldn't stay on the line. They called from Seattle, Washington, with concerns and believes that Native populations are in jeopardy, from some of the pollutants coming from mining and mineral exploration, and wanted to know what can we do to legislate keeping our water safe for drinking water and also free of cancers? And they couldn't stay on the line, but they wanted to hear comments on that from somebody who sits in your position.

Michael: I think, with respect to water-quality issues, and particularly ongoing pollution from mining activity, or maybe historic mining activity, we certainly still have a lot of those issues, particularly in the Pacific Northwest. I'm not so sure so much that there needs to be new legislation. Perhaps there does, but there's also a lot of tools already out there to address some of those specific situations. I know one in particular we're dealing with, Lake Roosevelt, behind Grand Coulee Dam, there's some historic contamination still coming off of some mining, some smelter activity up in that area. And we're working with the tribes who are involved and the responsible companies in the state of Washington to really try and strike an agreement on how we can do cleanup activity.

And that's, once again, something I think if at the end of the day if we can reach an agreement on the cleanup activity that we need, rather than going through the court process, even though the negotiation process has been somewhat slow. I tend to think, at the end of the day, we'll have the resources we need sooner and we'll have action on the ground sooner than if we go through the court process.

So that's my hope. But of course, if you have the use the laws as they exist as the only way to get recourse, then obviously we have the responsibility to do that, too.

Tara: And the bureau that you're working with is just not specific to tribes but also the nation as a whole. Anything you want to share, just to also put in perspective the work you're doing and how it plays into, I guess, the water of our life? Anything you want to add?

Michael: Well, I think we do have somewhat of an evolving mission. I think, if you look at the challenges out there facing water supplies, particularly in the arid west where we operate, in the 17 western states, we've just got ongoing challenges, whether it be droughts, extended droughts, climate change and how that'll impact our water resources, increasing population and, overall, depleting aquifers. All of these things are just creating unprecedented challenges that we need to face. So we look at it, there's five priorities I usually try and identify with respect to reclamationist programs west-wide, which certainly involve tribal communities, but not all of them. Do we need to take care of our existing infrastructure which you mentioned before, 476 dams with 348 reservoirs, our delivery systems? Those have great value to help us meet those challenges to produce power.

We need to help expand and stretch limited water resources. We've got a WaterSMART program intended to do that, to try and facilitate solutions and try and get ahead of some conflicts.

The environmental restoration, ecosystem restoration, river restoration activities that we're engaging in, a lot of those also have great tribal interest, particularly with those with fishing rights in the Pacific Northwest. A lot of the work we're doing is to further those tribal treaty interests.

We're trying to be part of the president's all-of-the-above energy strategy with respect to increasing the opportunities to develop sustainable hydro power. And then, finally, what we've been talking about today, one of our five priorities, which is the secretary's priority, which is the president's priority, is to strengthen tribal nations.

Tara: OK. And we started the hour thinking of the individual, and all the work you're doing includes lots of people and many networks, you could almost say internationally as well. And when you think about your time, and you've had several decades to take a look at how water rights affect humans in the United States, what about the legacy that you're going to leave? I know a lot of big names with the department you're in have left certain legacies, but when you think of yourself, your hope, what people will remember you for when you leave this office.

Michael: Well, I'm kind of laughing here because I had a whole speech one time centered around the fact that my claim was that I was no Floyd Dominy, who is one of the historic figures as a commissioner of the Bureau of Reclamation. So I'm not sure I'd still put myself in that category. I guess, fundamentally, I just hope the legacy that I leave is probably twofold, that our mission and our priorities were up to the challenges facing the American west. And that two, that there was a lot done on the ground, that we made progress in improving the lives of people on a daily basis and that we were very results-oriented during my tenure here.

I have to say, I'm sitting at my desk and I have this picture on my wall that was presented to me by the Navajo Nation at one of our celebrations on the San Juan River settlement. It's a picture that was drawn by one of the elementary school children. I think it was from Crownpoint, a number of them.

Tara: 10 seconds.

Michael: It says, "Thank you, Obama, for bringing the water." And it's got a picture of a house with a hose coming out of the house.

Tara: Mike Connor, commissioner, Bureau of Reclamation. We're at the end of the hour. And if the kids see it, well, it's a great start. Thanks for joining us here today on "Native America Calling." [music]

Announcer: "Native America Calling" is produced in the Annenberg National Native Voice Studios in Albuquerque, New Mexico, by Koahnic Broadcast Corporation, a Native, nonprofit media organization located in Anchorage, Alaska. Funding comes from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, the Annenberg Foundation, the McCune Charitable Foundation, the Ford Foundation, and the Nathan Cummings Foundation. Music by Brent Michael Davids. Visit us at nativeamericacalling.com.

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