

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

HARRY REID



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OPEN FOR RESEARCH



Interview Conducted and Edited by:  
Donald B. Seney in 1995  
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**STATEMENT OF DONATION  
OF ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW OF  
HON. HARRY REID**

1. In accordance with the provisions of Chapter 21 of Title 44, United States Code, and subject to the terms, conditions, and restrictions set forth in this instrument, I, HARRY REID, (hereinafter referred to as "the Donor"), of NEVADA, do hereby give, donate, and convey to the National Archives and Records Administration (hereinafter referred to as "the National Archives"), acting for and on behalf of the United States of America, all of my rights and title to, and interest in the information and responses (hereinafter referred to as "the Donated Materials") provided during the interview conducted on NOVEMBER 6, 1995, at WASHINGTON, D.C. and prepared for deposit with the National Archives and Records Administration in the following format: tape recording and transcript. This donation includes, but is not limited to, all copyright interests I now possess in the Donated Materials.
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Date: 11/1/95

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HARRY REID

INTERVIEWER: DONALD B. SENEY

**Bureau of Reclamation History Program  
Newlands Oral History Project Series—  
Senator Harry Reid**

Having determined that the materials donated above by HARRY REID are appropriate for preservation as evidence of the United States Government's organization, functions, policies, decisions, procedures, and transactions, and considering it to be in the public interest to accept these materials for deposit with the National Archives and Records Administration, I accept this gift on behalf of the United States of America, subject to the terms, conditions, and restrictions set forth in the above instrument.

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_  
Archivist of the United States

Note: Senator Reid dated this document November 6, 1995, but the scanner was unable to image the written date.

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**Bureau of Reclamation History Program  
Newlands Oral History Project Series—  
Senator Harry Reid**

## Introduction

In 1988, Reclamation began to create a history program. While headquartered in Denver, the history program was developed as a bureau-wide program.

One component of Reclamation's history program is its oral history activity. The primary objectives of Reclamation's oral history activities are: preservation of historical data not normally available through Reclamation records (supplementing already available data on the whole range of Reclamation's history); making the preserved data available to researchers inside and outside Reclamation.

In the case of the Newlands Project, the senior historian consulted the regional director to design a special research project to take an all around look at one Reclamation project. The regional director suggested the Newlands Project, and the research program occurred between 1994 and signing of the Truckee River Operating Agreement in 2008. Professor Donald B. Seney of the Government Department at California State University - Sacramento (now emeritus and living in South Lake Tahoe, California) undertook this work. The Newlands Project, while a small- to medium-sized Reclamation project, represents a microcosm of issues found throughout Reclamation: water transportation over great distances; three Native American groups with sometimes conflicting interests; private entities with competitive and sometimes misunderstood water rights; many local governments with growing water needs; Fish and Wildlife Service programs competing for water for endangered species in Pyramid Lake and for viability of the Stillwater National Wildlife Refuge to the east of Fallon, Nevada; and Reclamation's original water user, the Truckee-Carson Irrigation District, having to deal with modern competition for some of the water supply that originally flowed to farms and ranches in its community.

The senior historian of the Bureau of Reclamation developed and directs the oral history program. Questions, comments, and suggestions may be addressed to the senior historian.

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For additional information about Reclamation's history program see:

[www.usbr.gov/history](http://www.usbr.gov/history)

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**Bureau of Reclamation History Program  
Newlands Oral History Project Series—  
Senator Harry Reid**

**Oral History Interview  
Harry Reid**

BEGIN SIDE 1, TAPE 1. NOVEMBER 6, 1995.

Seney: My name is Donald Seney, and I'm with Senator Harry Reid in Senator Reid's assistant's office in Washington, D.C.

Good morning, Senator.

**Becoming Interested in the Problems of the  
Newlands Project**

Reid: Good morning.

Seney: Why don't we start out by telling me when you first became interested in the Newlands Project. I know you served in a variety of state offices, and maybe I'm thinking as lieutenant governor maybe was the first time this issue came up to you.

Reid: No, no.

Seney: Tell us, then, when that was.

Reid: I first became interested in this Newlands problem as a result of a conversation I had the night I was elected to the United States Senate in November of 1986. I had first learned of my being elected to the United States Senate in Reno, relatively early in the evening. I was at the Reno Airport catching a plane to Las Vegas to go there and do the things you do on election night when you win. A reporter asked me—and I don't know who the reporter was—"What is the most important problem facing the people of the state of Nevada?" And I responded, "Water problems in northern Nevada."

**"I knew . . . that the water problems in northern Nevada . . . were the most complex, difficult problems facing Nevada, but I . . . knew almost nothing about why . . ."**

At that time I had almost no knowledge of the water problems in northern Nevada. I knew from what I'd read in the newspapers and what I'd

heard as I traveled around during the campaign that the water problems in northern Nevada, in my opinion, were the most complex, difficult problems facing Nevada, but I, quite frankly, knew almost nothing about why there were problems.

### **Worked with Wayne Mehl, His Legislative Director**

After I said that, I came back to Washington and met with my legislative director, Wayne Mehl,<sup>1</sup> and we had a conversation, and the conversation was something like this. “Hey, I made this statement. Now I have to do something about it.”

Wayne Mehl, who was my legislative director, knew a little more about water than I did, but not much. Wayne Mehl had an interesting background. He had a Ph.D. [in history]<sup>2</sup> from Ohio

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1. Wayne Mehl participated in Reclamation’s oral history work on the Newlands Project.

2. A note on editorial conventions. In the text of these interviews, information in parentheses, ( ), is actually on the tape.

(continued...)

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State, he taught there for a while. He had been a long-time [Senate staffer] by the time I hired him, he knew his way around Washington. I hired him off [Senator] John Melcher's staff, and he was well versed in issues relating to the western United

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2. (...continued)

Information in brackets, [ ], has been added to the tape either by the editor to clarify meaning or at the request of the interviewee in order to correct, enlarge, or clarify the interview as it was originally spoken. Words have sometimes been struck out by editor or interviewee in order to clarify meaning or eliminate repetition. In the case of strikeouts, that material has been printed at 50% density to aid in reading the interviews but assuring that the struck out material is readable.

The transcriber and editor may also have removed some extraneous words such as false starts and repetitions without indicating their removal. The meaning of the interview has not been changed by this editing.

While we attempt to conform to most standard academic rules of usage (see *The Chicago Manual of Style*), we do not conform to those standards for individual's titles which then would only be capitalized in the text when they are specifically used as a title. The convention in the Federal government is to capitalize titles always. Likewise formal titles of acts and offices are capitalized but abbreviated usages are not, e.g., Division of Planning as opposed to "planning;" the Reclamation Projects Authorization and Adjustment Act of 1992, as opposed to "the 1992 act."

The convention with acronyms is that if they are pronounced as a word then they are treated as if they are a word. If they are spelled out by the speaker then they have a hyphen between each letter. An example is the Agency for International Development's acronym: said as a word, it appears as AID but spelled out it appears as A-I-D; another example is the acronym for State Historic Preservation Officer: SHPO when said as a word, but S-H-P-O when spelled out.

States in a general fashion.

But he really dove in on this and spent the vast majority of his time for the next couple of years working on this problem. He did really an outstanding job of educating me.

**“One of the real difficult things that we had to do was to get people to sit down and talk. . . .”**

One of the real difficult things that we had to do was to get people to sit down and talk. People literally would not sit down at the same desk. That is, you couldn't get the Indians to talk to the farmers. You couldn't get the farmers to talk to the conservationists. You couldn't get the people from Sierra Pacific Power [Company] to sit down with any of them. It was really a very difficult problem.

**“. . . the negotiations we had were as difficult to put together as the Middle East negotiations. . . .”**

It was kind of like you and I are speaking

[today,] on the day of the funeral of [Israeli Prime Minister] Yitzhak Rabin, who was assassinated in Israel, and on a much smaller, not nearly as important scale, [but] the negotiations we had ~~related to the~~ [were as difficult to put together as the] Middle East negotiations.

Three years ago, as you and I speak, if someone had said there would be a funeral and the President of Egypt, the King of Jordan would attend an Israeli state funeral, you would have said, “What, you crazy?” Well, that’s about the way it was. To think that we could get people to sit down and talk about this and then to do a [water] deal was unheard of, but we did the deal, and that’s the long answer to a short question.

Seney: No, that’s a good answer. Let me say two things.

One, someone did say to me that they wondered if

you really understood that night in Reno when you were asked what was your most important priority and you said the northern Nevada water wars, that if you really appreciated the difficulty that you were going to get yourself into with all this.

### **Role of Senator Paul Laxalt in Trying to Find a Solution**

Reid: No, I knew what I was saying, but I had no idea of the complexity. I had no idea of the history of failed attempts over the last seventy or eighty years, actually ninety years, to do the deal. Paul Laxalt, one of our fine public servants, tried it and failed. I didn't know that when I said all this. (laughter)

Seney: Let me ask you about that specifically, Senator, because this has been mentioned in several of the interviews, so that you can respond to it. People have told me that they thought your motivation was directly linked to Senator Laxalt. That is, that

Senator Laxalt, who at the time the compact failed in 1986 was an extremely powerful man and was not able to get the interstate compact through the United States Senate, and that there were those who thought that you had picked this up because you wanted to be able to achieve what Senator Laxalt had not achieved. I guess you're saying that that just isn't so.

Reid: Not a bit of truth to it. When I served in the House and his deal came up before the House and it was killed because the Indians didn't support it, that agreement meant nothing to me. I represented the southern part of the state, and maybe somebody briefed me on it that morning, but it really didn't mean a thing. And I have to say, frankly, I'd like to boast and say I did a lot better job than Paul Laxalt, but the fact of the matter is, Paul Laxalt helped me

arrive at my success. But for Laxalt's failure, I wouldn't have been able to reach my success.

As you find with difficult problems, you usually find people who have tried and failed. They get very little credit. But in this arrangement, Paul Laxalt had worked on this for a long time. He worked on it when he was governor. He has a place up near the lake, and he was very well versed in these areas, better than I am, but he wasn't able to do it. But I repeat, his failure was part of my success.

**"I learned, after I got into it, what he had done that didn't work out right, and we benefitted from that. . . ."**

I learned, after I got into it, what he had done that didn't work out right, and we benefitted from that.

Seney: As you began to become educated on the Newlands Project questions, how did the issue seem to emerge

to you? Do you recall how you began to form your judgments on that?

### **Learning about Newlands Project Problems**

**“ . . . we were very fortunate. I had some people who wanted the deal to succeed. . . .”**

Reid: Well, we were very fortunate. I had some people who wanted the deal to succeed. Joe Gremban,<sup>3</sup> who was at Sierra Pacific Power, he’s now an old man, when he was head of Pacific Power, he was in his later years of managing that company, but he came to me and he said, “I think we can do a deal. We, Sierra Pacific Power, West Pac [the water utility owned and operated by Sierra Pacific Power Company],” who had never helped anybody in anything, they were very self-centered, had a reputation of trying to make as much money as they

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3. Joe Gremban participated in Reclamation’s oral history work on the Newlands Project.

could in as short a period of time, they said, “We’re going to do everything we can to make this succeed. It’s important. It’s important to the state of Nevada, but it’s also important to our company.” I had help from him.

### **The Pyramid Lake Tribe and Joe Ely**

We also had a visionary by the name of Joe Ely,<sup>4</sup> leader of that [Pyramid Lake] tribe. Have you had the chance to visit with him?

Seney: Yes, I have.

Reid: Joe Ely, uneducated in academics but well educated in human nature, was a person who was willing to let people slap him on the side of the face, and he would turn the other cheek and come back for more. He was extremely smart and he was willing to take a chance for his tribe. I made a commitment to him:

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4. Joe Ely contributed to Reclamation’s oral history program on the Newlands Project.

“I will help you. You have to help me. You have to make this thing succeed.” And he lived up to his end of the deal and I’ve lived up to my end of the deal. They’re having a new high school built there. We’ve done a lot of good things [for the tribe].

Seney: On the reservation.

**Role of the Officials of Reno, Sparks, California,  
and Nevada**

Reid: That’s right. I told him I would help if they would help me. I’m the first person—and I say that knowing the world’s going to read this—elected official that has really gone out of his way for Indian people in Nevada, and one of the main reasons I’ve done that is Joe Ely. He, to me, was great. So we ~~had him~~ [worked well together].

We also had Mayor Pete Sferrazza,<sup>5</sup> mayor

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5. Pete Sferrazza contributed to Reclamation’s oral history work on the Newlands Project.

of Reno, a man who served three terms and got very little credit for anything. He wasn't out front in any of this stuff, but he was always supportive. If I ever needed anything, Pete was always there, and I appreciate Sferrazza, in effect, staying out of things.  
(chuckles)

Seney: So he didn't blackball the agreement or make trouble?

Reid: No, he stayed out of the way, stayed out of the way and let us move forward. The people of Sparks, the ~~management~~ [administration] there, were very good, in spite of the fact that there were nay-sayers and people demonstrating and coming to city council meetings, but they hung in there. They were good also.

We had some initial problems with Pete Morros, who was a friend of mine and I served with

his wife on the [Nevada] Gaming Commission. She was secretary of the commission. But he turned out to be a champ.

Seney: Nevada Director of Conservation and Resources.

**“We could never have done this deal without California. California needed it. We needed it. . . .”**

Reid: Yes. Pete Morros. It was hard for him, but he came around. [David N.] Kennedy, the head of [the Department of] Water Resources in the state of California, was very far-sighted. We could never have done this deal without California. California needed it. We needed it.

**“ . . . we had two states involved; we had two Indian tribes; we had endangered species; we had the cities of Reno and Sparks; we had the agricultural interests; we had the wetlands; we had it all. . . .”**

But, you know, when I look back at this, we had two states involved; we had two Indian tribes; we

had endangered species; we had the cities of Reno and Sparks; we had the agricultural interests; we had the wetlands; we had it all.

Seney: This is Public Law 101-618.<sup>6</sup>

**Support for Public Law 101-618 from the Reno and Sparks Chamber of Commerce**

Reid: Yes. It's all right in there. We got tremendous support from the Reno Chamber of Commerce.

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6. Public Law 101-618 became law on November 16, 1990. The law contains two acts: The Fallon Paiute-Shoshone Tribal Settlement Act and the Truckee-Carson-Pyramid Lake Water Rights Settlement Act. The main topics of the legislation are:

- Fallon Paiute-Shoshone Tribal Settlement Act
- Interstate allocation of waters of the Truckee and Carson rivers.
- Negotiation of a new Truckee River Operating Agreement (TROA)
- Water rights purchase program is authorized for the Lahontan Valley wetlands, with the intent of sustaining an average of about 25,000 acres of wetlands.
- Recovery program is to be developed for the Pyramid Lake cui-ui and Lahontan cutthroat trout
- The Newlands Project is re-authorized to serve additional purposes, including recreation, fish and wildlife, and municipal water supply for Churchill and Lyon Counties. A project efficiency study is required
- Contingencies are placed on the effective date of the legislation and various parties to the settlement are required to dismiss specified litigation.

Source is: [http://www.usbr.gov/mp/lbao/public\\_law\\_101-618.html](http://www.usbr.gov/mp/lbao/public_law_101-618.html) accessed on December 7, 2011, at about 2:00 in the afternoon.

They formed an organization called—what was it called? [Coalition for a Negotiated Settlement.] Anyway, we’ll get that for you. They formed an organization and they raised money so that they could advertise in newspapers and communicate. This is an agreement that the word “Democrat” and “Republican” never came up, never arose. [Some of] the biggest supporters of this deal were Republicans.

Seney: Within Nevada.

Reid: That’s right. And even though I don’t vote with the chamber of commerce often, the Reno and Sparks Chamber of Commerce, deserve an A+ out of this.

Seney: As I read what they had to say about it, I saw their interest primarily as development interests, which one would expect of a chamber of commerce, more water available to the Truckee Meadows.

Reid: They weren't concerned about more; they wanted something certain.

**“They don't want a lot of growth there, even today, but they wanted certainty, and they got certainty in this agreement. . . .”**

The uncertainty is what was killing the operations in that part of the [state]; it's a part of our state that is slow growth. They don't want a lot of growth there, even today, but they wanted certainty, and they got certainty in this agreement. That was the important part of their interest.

### **TCID Couldn't Come Together to Cooperate**

So we got good cooperation, we had real statesmanlike attitudes, people willing to give and take, from everybody except the ranchers, farmers. The problem with them, it's not that they didn't want to do a deal, they had no authority. They had no one that could speak for them. They would

come to the negotiations one day, make a deal, come back [the next day] and say, “We had no authority to do that.”

Seney: Would this be the board, Senator, you’re talking about, the TCID board?

Reid: Yeah, they would not delegate authority to anybody, so we had one person speaking for the Indians, one person speaking for Sierra Pacific, one person speaking for California, Nevada, and all that, but we had a whole board of directors for the Newlands people. And as a result of that, we could never make a deal with them. It’s unfortunate.

**“We took care of them in the agreement anyway. . . a majority of the people that were in on the negotiations . . . wanted to do something to help them. . . .”**

We took care of them in the agreement anyway. We did a lot of things for them that was helpful to them, because I believe that a majority of the people that

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were in on the negotiations while they were, wanted to do something [to help them].

Seney: One of the things they tell me out there, I think I have this section right, Section 206 of Public Law 101-618, has some things in it that Truckee-Carson Irrigation District (TCID) and the farmers don't like.

### **The Issue of Recoupment**

Reid: What is that?

Seney: The recoupment is in there, forcing recoupment, and a variety of other—

**“ . . . if you believe in fairness and justice, I mean, how could you allow somebody who's taken—we don't know the amount, but about a million-acre feet of water, how can you walk away from that? . . . ”**

Reid: Well, I mean, if you believe in fairness and justice, I mean, how could you allow somebody who's taken—we don't know the amount, but about a

million-acre feet of water, how can you walk away from that? [There could never be a settlement unless the water that was wrongly taken was mitigated.]

**Unhappiness of Some in the Fallon Community  
with Reid and the Legislation**

Seney: Their unhappiness with you has taken a number of forms. One was the local gorilla. Do you know about this?

Reid: Oh, yeah, I saw the gorilla.

Seney: The gorilla with “Hairy Reed”—your name not spelled right. There was a faction who was responsible for that. Others didn’t like that; they thought that that would personally offend you and needlessly antagonize you. Were they right? Did it personally offend you and needlessly antagonize you?

Reid: No, I don’t think so. I didn’t think it was funny, but

I wasn't antagonized. I mean, I just thought that this kind of showed the childishness, the childish nature, of some of the people. I mean, this is like you'd do for a kid who had a football game in high school or something. So I thought it was kind of childish. I thought it showed the merits of their arguments, which were very immature most of the time. And there's a part of me said, "Most people in Fallon don't feel this way. If they really understood what we were doing, they would agree with me." So it didn't offend me. I kind of felt sorry for them that here at a national gathering, the first fresh water to go into the Stillwater Marshes in almost ninety years, they've got a gorilla bouncing around out there, trying to make fun of me. You know, it only added to my stature; it didn't take away from it. People kind of said, "Why are they doing that to

him?”

Seney: As I've gotten to know the farmers—and I've interviewed quite a number of them—I like them. Maybe I understand them. I'm not sure. But their feelings about you is that I think they can't quite understand that maybe you have a policy difference with them or a vision of the area which is a substantive one. They tend to think that this is kind of a personal matter. They don't vote for you, so you don't like them, you won't do anything for them. I've even heard it said that you had conflict with Senator Carl Dodge when you were lieutenant governor, and that may have contributed to your antagonism toward the project.

I'm saying these things because these will be in the other interviews, and I wanted to give you an opportunity to respond to them. Maybe as you do

that, if you could kind of give us your vision of the project area out there and how you see the Truckee developing.

### **Nevada Senator Carl Dodge**

Reid: Carl Dodge,<sup>7</sup> I served on the state legislature with him when I was President of the Senate, lieutenant governor [I also served in the Assembly when he was in the Senate]. I was president of the Senate, worked with him. Carl Dodge and I served on the Gaming Commission together after that. Carl Dodge is a fine person, well educated, graduate of Stanford [University] law, and Carl Dodge, I found him to be always one of the most reasonable, articulate people for the interests of Churchill County and rural Nevada that we've ever had. So whoever thinks that Carl Dodge and I have a

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7. State Senator Carl Dodge contributed to Reclamation's oral history work on the Newlands Project.

problem simply don't know our history and background. I have the greatest respect, [he's] one of the fine public servants in the history of Nevada, a man of some wealth, who, rather than trying to maximize how much money he can make, spent decades in the Nevada state legislature, [and on the] Nevada Gaming Commission. So I like him. We never had a problem. In fact, Carl Dodge and I had many meetings during all the time this went on, just a lot of people didn't know about it.

Seney: He's one of the people out there you keep in touch with on these matters?

Reid: Yes. Carl Dodge has an open door to my office.

**“ . . . some of the people in Churchill County, they're not being realistic. . . .**

One thing that I think, some of the people in Churchill County, they're not being realistic. For example, [one of the] first person[s] to sell water

rights under the new law was Ted deBraga<sup>8</sup> [President of the Truckee-Carson Irrigation District]. I mean, I don't know how much it was, but near a million dollars he got. He doesn't go around telling people about this. But one of the biggest critics of the whole deal was [one of] the first to take money. I mean, if it was such a bad deal, why would you be rushing to the door to sell? And I think deBraga would be the first to acknowledge—privately—not a bad deal. He made money on the whole thing.

### **Senator Reid Is from Rural Nevada**

Seney: This was the sale of water rights for the wetlands.

Reid: Yeah. Also I think it's important that the history that you're writing will show that I am from rural Nevada. My home today is in ~~rural~~ Searchlight,

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8. Ted DeBraga contributed to Reclamation's oral history work on the Newlands Project.

Nevada.

**“ . . . I understand rural Nevada . . . it’s changing . . . the people of Churchill County are much better off as a result of my involvement, even though they may not acknowledge that. . . .”**

I’m the first person in many, many decades to represent the state of Nevada having been born and raised in rural Nevada, and I understand rural Nevada quite well. I realize that it’s not static, it’s changing, and you need people that understand rural Nevada to step in and help change take place. And certainly the people of Churchill County are much better off as a result of my involvement, even though they may not acknowledge that.

### **The Federal Interest in Churchill County and Fallon**

Would it have been better to have government decrees keep coming down, as was happening?

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**The Legislation Gave Guidance to the Department  
of the Interior about Management of Water in the  
Area**

No one can take jurisdiction away from the Department of Interior; that's their project. And I think I have given, through this legislation, them some guidance.

**“Churchill County is a moving target. . . .”**

Churchill County is a moving target in that you now have the huge military base in place, thousands of people, has thousands of military people there that help that place. Help Fallon and surrounding areas, spending money, and they'll continue to help. The area is growing.

**“. . . marginal farmland isn't important anymore, so what we have to do is wind up having a wonderful greenbelt in Churchill County, but have it in the land that's productive and strong and not waste water. They've been wasting water there. . . .”**

The importance of marginal farmland isn't

important anymore, so what we have to do is wind up having a wonderful greenbelt in Churchill County, but have it in the land that's productive and strong and not waste water. They've been wasting water there. I mean, if you think of the huge amount of water wasted there, the cities of Reno and Sparks, when I started this, were using 69,000 acre feet of water. At one time they[, the farmers,] were getting over 400,000 acre feet down in the farmland. [Tape recorder turned off.]

Seney: When you had to leave, you were mentioning the waste of water out on the Newlands Project.

**“ . . . I think when this is all over and done with, that you will see that this agreement is for their benefit. The people of Churchill County are more than the people who grow alfalfa. . . . ”**

Reid: Yeah. And so my point is that I think when this is all over and done with, that you will see that this agreement is for their benefit. The people of

Churchill County are more than the people who grow alfalfa. Churchill County has a serious problem over water.

**Arsenic in Churchill County Water Is an Issue**

They've had arsenic in their water since I was in the legislature in 1969; I heard about it then. There has to be something done about their municipal water supply.

**“We have the most important naval air training center in the world in Fallon; that’s important. . . .”**

We have the most important naval air training center in the world in Fallon; that’s important.

Seney: Have you not been active in expanding that, Senator?

Reid: Very active. I’m chairman, ranking member, top Democrat in the Senate on military construction. So we’re concerned about that.

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### **Fallon and Fernley Have Become Bedroom Communities for Reno**

And then there are areas along the Newlands Project, Fernley, for example, which is in Lyon County, they have some serious problems. We need to help them. It's become a bedroom community for Reno, as has Fallon. Many, many people live in Fallon and commute.

**“ . . . the vast majority of ranching that takes place in Churchill County is done on a part-time basis. . . .”**

And I think the other important thing that people tend to ignore is This is not an area where people devote their whole life to ranching. As I say, the majority of the people that are in ranching are people who work at the air base or work in Reno and they come home and they take care of their few cattle and their few crops in the evenings and on weekends. There are some full-time farmers, and I

hope they will continue to be full-time farmers. But the agreement is for more than just the ranching community.

### **How Senator Reid Got Public 101-618 Passed**

Seney: I know Senator [Bill] Bradley was a big supporter and a key ally in this as Chairman of the Subcommittee on Water and Power. How did you get Senator Bradley interested in these issues?

Reid: Senator Bradley has long been interested in Western water problems, and this was a vehicle for him to show his interest, and he was a big help. I have to say, though—you know, this is for posterity—Bradley's idea with [Congressman] George Miller in the House was to have this omnibus bill that had the Utah Project in it, the California water, all these big water things they were going to work out, and they lumped me in with them, which almost killed

my bill.

The thing I had going for me is, I feel that George Miller from the House is my friend. He was chairman of the full committee over there, then called Interior Committee. He told me, he said, "If you get a bill out over here, I'll pass it for you." I, frankly, don't think he thought I could get one. I spun mine off of the omnibus bill in the latter days of the session, and got the Indian Affairs Committee, of which I'm a member, to report out a bill. It went to the floor, and like a miracle—I have no other way of explaining it—like a miracle, I asked unanimous consent that that bill be passed without any floor action, and it did. It passed. I mean, unbelievable that late in a session a bill as complex as that, that I could get it reported out. A couple of senators had a few problems with it. I talked to

them. They withdrew their holds, their objections, and that bill passed.

Then I went to the House, and they had a joint referral. They referred it to Interior [Committee], maybe even Agriculture [Committee], but I worked that out. In fact, I know they did Agriculture. I worked that out. But then it went to the Merchant Marine Committee because it dealt with endangered species. [Congressman] Gary Studds was chairman of that subcommittee that has jurisdiction over that, and I remember so clearly, I said, "I've got to meet with him." I went over and met with them in an anteroom called the Rayburn Room, off the House floor, and he had all of his staff there. I told him how important it was to me. They wanted to hold hearings on it and all that. He had a staff guy that I knew didn't want to help me,

and he didn't.

Studds called me later that afternoon, he said, "I'm going to let your bill go just because I like you, because you're my friend." And as a result of that, we only now had a day or two to go before the session was over.

[It] went on the House floor. The final action taken was to be in the House, because their bill was identical to our bill in the Senate. George Miller, as you know, picks up a few enemies as a session goes on, and he had a lot of people mad at him. So he couldn't stand on the floor and ask for a unanimous consent that the bill pass, just because it was him, they would vote against it.

Seney: It only takes one person.

Reid: One person. So he had Bruce Vento stand. And it was the next to the last bill of that session. He

stood. It passed.

Seney: If I may, Senator, my understanding from TCID people is that they went over to the House and got a temporary hold put on it.

Reid: Must have been real temporary. (laughter)

Seney: It expired after a couple of hours. You're not aware of this?

**“One of the good qualities I have, I tend to forget people who mess around with me. . . .”**

Reid: No. I may have forgotten. I have a lot of not-so-good qualities. One of the good qualities I have, I tend to forget people who mess around with me.

Seney: That's probably just as well in political life, isn't it?

Reid: Also, one of the unsung heroes—from people who like the deal, I've gotten all the accolades and all the glory and all the write-ups, but the person this deal couldn't have been done without her help was

[Congresswoman] Barbara Vucanovich.<sup>9</sup> Barbara Vucanovich and I philosophically are miles apart. We came to the House together. We've had our share of differences.

**“ . . . Barbara Vucanovich, when she realized this was an important piece of legislation for the people of Reno and Sparks, and that it would be helpful to the people of Churchill County in due time, she supported this. . . .”**

But Barbara Vucanovich, when she realized this was an important piece of legislation for the people of Reno and Sparks, and that it would be helpful to the people of Churchill County in due time, she supported this. It would have been easy for her to talk out of both sides of her mouth, but she didn't do that. She was supportive of this. She could have gotten any Republican to stand and object to this; she didn't do that. Every time I get an opportunity,

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9. Member of Congress Barbara Vucanovich contributed to Reclamation's oral history work on the Newlands Project.

I always say this deal would not have been possible without Barbara, and I believe that.

**“ . . . Gary Studds, Barbara Vucanovich, George Miller, Bruce Vento, Bill Bradley. . . . Senator Daniel K. Inouye, the Chairman of the Indian Affairs Committee, . . . let me do this . . . ”**

I wanted to make sure we covered Gary Studds, Barbara Vucanovich, George Miller, Bruce Vento, Bill Bradley. They were all, in their own way, including Senator [Daniel K.] Inouye, the Chairman of the Indian Affairs Committee, who let me do this, so there were a lot of people involved in this very historic legislation.

Seney: What did you do to make sure that President [George] Bush would sign it?

### **Convincing President George H. W. Bush to Sign the Legislation**

Reid: That's the next chapter. Secretary of Agriculture was the man from Nebraska, later Chairman of the National Republican Party [Clayton Yeider]. What

was his name? Anyway, we'll find his name .

Seney: I may even remember it.

Reid: He was agricultural secretary. He wrote a letter recommending that it be vetoed.

Seney: Do you know why he wrote that, Senator?

Reid: I think he was very political, just didn't like me.  
(chuckles) I think that's about it.

Seney: In this case you think it might be a purely partisan question.

Reid: I think with him most everything he did was partisan. I had a lot of people working on trying to get him [President Bush] to sign it. Sig Rogich , who was one of his advisors, a Nevadan, was, to me, very supportive of this. He said he'd help me with the President.

### **Pete Wilson Supported the Legislation**

But the key to this was [Senator] Pete Wilson. I called Pete Wilson. Pete Wilson was

going home. He was running for governor now. We had this big bill, omnibus bill, and that hurt California, in his mind. It hurt the California farmers, so he wouldn't support it. I had talked to him about my legislation a number of times, so he knew about it.

Seney: There was the interstate allocation of water that California signed off on.

Reid: Oh, yeah, very important to California. So I called him, and he was flying, and he called me as soon as he landed, wherever he landed in California. I said, "Pete, this is real important to Nevada and to California. I don't think the President will sign this unless you weigh in and tell him how important it is for California." So he did, and I think that's the reason—at least I've given credit to Pete Wilson for having called the President. I know he called him.

END SIDE 1, TAPE 1. NOVEMBER 6, 1995.  
BEGIN SIDE 2, TAPE 1. NOVEMBER 6, 1995.

Seney: Your belief was that President [George H. W.] Bush signed the—why don't you repeat that. I'm sorry.

Reid: I think the main reason that Bush signed this is because of Pete Wilson calling him, telling him to do that, and I've always been very grateful to Pete Wilson for that. Pete realized it was important to California. As I say, I have a letter someplace where President Bush wrote me from an airplane, Air Force One, saying, "I'm over Abu Dhabi (or someplace) saying I'm signing this for you," and said nice things.

Seney: And then you were surprised? Up to that point, you weren't confident that the president would sign the legislation?

Reid: I was very happy. That was November 16th, 1990, the same day my granddaughter was born. So I was

flying. I was with my daughter at Georgetown Hospital, and I left there, going to Atlanta for something, maybe on the way to get back to Nevada. I don't really remember, but I remember it was Atlanta. And somebody brought me a message on the plane, while the plane was flying, saying, "Your bill's been signed."

#### **How the Federal Bureaucracy Responds to Problems**

Seney: One of the things I read, to prepare for our chat today, was the hearings before Senator Bradley's subcommittee in February 1990, where, among other people, Assistant Secretary [John] Sayre and other people from the Interior Department appeared. Secretary Sayre's testimony was not impressive; certainly Senator Bradley did not think so, and perhaps you didn't either. But in that, there was a lot of opposition from the Interior Department. And

the Navy was there and so forth, and Justice was there. Apparently all that was overcome in terms of the legislation.

Reid: Yeah. In fact, starts with a B, the guy that's worked on this so long. You know, your friend.

Seney: [William D.] Bettenberg.<sup>10</sup>

Reid: Yeah, Bettenberg. He was one of the people that testified, and he knew nothing, and I was critical of him. But he knew nothing. He got in. He's an old-line government official, bureaucrat. He dove in there, learned all about it, and he's been great, as have a number of the other people who were at that hearing who didn't know anything. Part of their problem was, you see, in government, if it's never been done before, don't do it. That's the rule of a bureaucrat. And here we did everything that hadn't

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10. William Bettenberg contributed to Reclamation's oral history work on the Newlands Project.

been done before, and some of these bureaucrats, it was hard for them to handle that. But after they got on board, things have moved along quite well.

Seney: My understanding is that Mr. Bettenberg was brought in to kind of pick up the pieces after this disastrous testimony of Assistant Secretary Sayre, when it was clear that the Department was at odds with one another, Fish and Wildlife, Bureau of Reclamation, Bureau of Indian Affairs. They had uninformed and uncoordinated, some might say, policies, and Bettenberg was brought in. Are you ever involved at that level? Were you made aware that that was going on at Interior?

Reid: No. I wasn't. Maybe my staff was, but I wasn't.

**Changes in the Congress after the November, 1994 Elections Won't Affect Public Law 101-618**

Seney: One of the things Mr. [Larry W.] Werner and I spoke about was the 1994 election, in which there

were, of course, changes in both houses of Congress, and the impact that that had on maybe being able to legislate more changes out of the Newlands Project. My question here really has to do with Public Law 101-618. Do you see that as—

Reid: Is that my bill?

Seney: Yes. That's the Settlement Act. Do you see that legislation at all in peril because of the new majority in Congress?

Reid: No way in the world you could change that legislation.

Seney: Explain for our future readers why it can't be changed. I guess a superficial observer might think, and I think out on the project they thought, that, "Oh, boy, here we have a Republican majority in both houses. Maybe we're going to get some changes in that legislation." Could you explain to us in detail, Senator, why that legislation won't be

changed?

**“It’s very hard to pass a bill, but it’s real easy to stop one. So there’s just no way that they could change this legislation. . . .”**

Reid: It’s very hard to pass a bill, but it’s real easy to stop one. So there’s just no way that they could change this legislation. I mean, in the Senate, we can object to about anything, and that’s why my earlier part of our conversation I said was a miracle that my bill passed without any Senate debate whatsoever—nothing. There were no words said about it; it just flew through the Senate. That rarely happens. And to change a major piece of legislation, this bill is now the model of how to handle problems of water in the West. I mean, it’s used at seminars, it’s taught at universities. Whenever they have conferences, they talk about this.

Now, this is really landmark legislation.

Pretty good for somebody that didn’t know what

they were talking about when they said something should be done when it happened. And even the people in Fallon have accepted it. I mean, it's like some people never—say this as nice as I can—some people never give up. But I mean, look at what's happened. We have the wetlands there that people are now hunting. That had dried up. I went out there, and there were no nests. The water that went in there—realize that the water that went in there for ninety years was runoff from the farms, very toxic, full of fertilizers and other chemicals. Fresh water is going in there now. In addition to the rain that comes once in a while, fresh water. We bought water to put it in there. That's helping Churchill County, because people come there, there are Duck Clubs and all this kind of stuff. No one ever wants that to be reversed.

The progress that has been made at Pyramid

Lake is significant. They are doing really quite well. We have the problems resolved. What, are we going to tell California we want to renege on our deal? We're going to change that line? I mean, let's be serious about this. (laughter)

So I think we've come a long way. We've negotiated a settlement, that calls for implementation, but that's taking place almost on schedule. So I mean, just last week we had the Floriston rates change. No one thought that would ever happen. It's done. That's part of the deal. The water company changed the way they're going to produce hydroelectric power. That's done.

**“ . . . we're just moving right along. . . . ”**

I mean, we're just moving right along.

Seney: Could I take you back a bit? It doesn't hurt if we sort of jump around a little bit here. My understanding is that once you got in the United

States Senate, and this was your number-one issue, and this obviously came out of the discussions you mentioned with Mr. Mehl, you sent a letter out, in, I think, 1987, to a variety of interests, inviting them to come and to negotiate. Do you recall that?

### **The Origins of Public Law 101-618**

Reid: I recall, and one of the deals I made in the original letter was something had never been done before. I said to everyone, "No need to contact me privately, because everything we're going to do here, the others are going to know about it. If I have a meeting with Bob, Sam's going to know about it. If I have a meeting with Sam, Bob's going to know. Everything's going to be on the table here. No secret meetings, no behind-the-scene deals. Everybody here is going to deal from the top of the deck." That's what the letter was all about.

Seney: You mentioned Joe Ely, whom I've interviewed; I spent five hours with him. I found him a very interesting individual. One of the things I found most interesting about him, Senator, was his political judgment and his political insight. Did that impress you about him, as well?

**Joe Ely**

Reid: He was the greatest. He was the greatest. You know, sometimes you see gifted athletes, somebody that can jump high, run fast, and work hard, they have a good touch on the ball. That's Joe Ely about politics. This is something he didn't learn; he was born with these communication skills that he had. Just like Bo Jackson was born with that great body he had. Joe Ely was born with these skills of communication.

Seney: I know you're rushed, Senator, and you have other things to do today, but let me just ask you, when I

called your staff and asked about an appointment, they told me, “Oh, the senator is very interested in history. I’m sure he’ll be glad to talk to you.”

These will be on the shelves for a long time. These are going to be printed on acid-free paper when the book is published, your interview, we’ll send you a copy. It will be in the research library, so it will be around for a long, long time. With that in mind, could you kind of give me a sense of what you think is the contribution of this settlement to the water controversy, and anything else that I haven’t asked that you think ought to be added to the record?

### **Assessment of the Historical Importance of the Water Settlement**

Reid: As a historian, which I feel I am, I feel that this is important legislation, but as I’ve said in the interview, I was at the right place at the right time. Kind of like a reformer, you know, the guy that gets

all the credit, as I've indicated before, we forget about all the people that led the way, and there were a lot of people that led the way here. That doesn't take away from the importance of the legislation. I think it's very important.

One of my proudest accomplishments in my governmental career is this legislation. I think from a political science perspective, it indicates that you can really do more than it appears. Had anyone tried to, as we say in Nevada, make book on whether you could do this deal or not, odds would have been strongly against this happening. But if you work hard and have a just cause, a lot of times things work out. Not all the time, but a lot of time, and this is one of those times that it worked out.

This was the right thing to do, and it hasn't helped me politically, I understand that, but that's okay. My biggest accomplishments have created

real political enemies for me, but I say that I would rather have done this than going everywhere saying, "Gee, isn't he a nice guy."

Seney: In political terms, Churchill County, to my knowledge, has never really voted for you in any statewide election.

### **Political Implications of the Settlement**

Reid: Sure did a lot better than I had this last time.  
(laughter)

Seney: And I guess if one were to look at this strictly in political terms, and certainly you must, I mean, you're running for office and this is part of the way you need to look at things, the votes are really up in the Reno, Sparks, and in the upper Carson area. I wouldn't be shocked if that sometimes came up in your thinking.

Reid: Well, if anyone goes into the state of Nevada thinking that doing anything to damage rural

Nevada helps you in the populated areas, it doesn't.

Seney: I'm saying this because, again, it's been said on some of the other interviews, so I wanted to give you a chance to comment on this particular issue.

Reid: No, I've found that if you do things to hurt yourself in rural Nevada, it hurts you in the more populated areas. Nevada, even though 90 percent of the people live in the metropolitan Reno, Las Vegas areas, many of those 90 percent feel that they're kind of part of the West and rural West, so they don't like anybody messing with rural Nevada.

Hey, look, I hope you're right. I hope it does help me, but it certainly was nothing calculated in that regard. In fact, most of my advisors told me, "Stay out of it. Don't get involved in this deal."

Seney: Because it's a no-win situation, in other words. And you didn't heed their advice.

Reid: No, as I said, election night I said that was the

biggest problem and how could I not try to work on that.

Seney: Again, one of the people who—and I think it was from the Pyramid Lake Tribe, they're very grateful to you, of course, because you've been very helpful to them, and it was Norm Harry, I'll tell you who said it, and he laughed and he said, "I'm not sure the senator knew what he was getting himself in for when he said that."

Reid: I've cried a few times. I haven't laughed. But it has been a real problem. I mean, you know, we've talked about the opposition in rural Nevada. We had opposition in Reno. We had people who didn't want water meters, and they demonstrated and they tried to get a public vote on whether they should have water meters. We had some real adversarial things going in Reno.

### **Why You Have to Take Chances and Try to Solve**

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**Bureau of Reclamation History Program  
Newlands Oral History Project Series—  
Senator Harry Reid**

### **Difficult Problems**

But what I would say to people, politicians who many years from now read this, I'd say just what I said a little while ago. Take chances. That's all. That's the satisfaction you get, is trying to work on problems that are difficult to solve. I mean, anyone can go to a town hall meeting or speak at a high school graduation. These are the kind of things that allow you to say, gee, the time I spent in public service, not making a lot of money, spending a lot of time on things that some people don't think are real important, these are the kinds of things that make you feel it's worthwhile. My negotiated settlement, some other things I've worked on, my taxpayers' bill of rights, my national park, my wilderness, some of those kinds of things are things that have been hard and created some problems for me, but I feel if I did nothing else in my whole

political career than this, I will feel it's been a success.

Seney: Let me ask you about one more thing that's been brought up, and this has to do with the Settlement II negotiations. It's been said to me by people out on the project that, first of all, they never thought you were really serious about these negotiations. What was really in your mind, as they speculate about what was in your mind, was that you fully intended to sponsor legislation which would resolve these questions not to the advantage of TCID and the farmers out in the area, but in order to build political support, you really needed to have the negotiations first, which you really didn't think would go anywhere. Then the legislation would follow.

**Settlement II Negotiations and Theories about  
Why Reid Did What He Did**

Reid: You see, what the problem is with people on all this

conspiratorial stuff, they don't know me and they don't know government very well. (chuckles) I mean, you know, it's possible that this second round went forward because it was an effort to try to get the ranchers, the farmers, involved in the process. We didn't need to; we could just go around them. But I think this would be much better to work out than to have the Interior Department just jam it down their throat, which, by law, they have the right to do that right as we speak.

So I think that these people who are making all these "He must have done it for this reason or that reason," why don't they just look at the facts? I mean, we had some extremely good meetings and we did something that I thought was quite good, we had a professional arbiter, a professional problem-solver, who we raised the money and we paid her. I think it was a great way to go.

**“ . . . we came extremely close to resolving their problems. . . . these few detractors we have should understand, number one, things will never be the way they used to be; and, number two, that things will work out a lot better for them more quickly if they got involved and started making some decisions. Otherwise, others will be making decisions for them. . . .”**

And we came extremely close to resolving their problems. But again, they were decisionless. When it came right down to saying, “Okay, we can do it this way,” they didn’t have anybody who could do that. But we came very close. So I think that these few detractors we have should understand, number one, things will never be the way they used to be; and, number two, that things will work out a lot better for them more quickly if they got involved and started making some decisions. Otherwise, others will be making decisions for them. That’s a federal project. That will always be a federal project. The federal government will always have

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the ultimate say as to what happens there.

**TCID Representatives Suggest Paul Laxalt Serve  
as a Neutral Mediator**

Seney: I understand that when Ernie Schank<sup>11</sup> came to you, and I think Lyman McConnell<sup>12</sup> may have been there too, and they discussed these new round of negotiations with you, that they suggested former Senator [Paul] Laxalt as the mediator and negotiator, or mediator. Do you recall that?

Reid: No.

Seney: That was their recollection.

Reid: And if they had done that, it was a bad idea anyway. You needed a nonpolitical person as was that woman. What was her name?

Seney: Gail Bingham.<sup>13</sup>

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11. Ernie Schank contributed to Reclamation's oral history work on the Newlands Project.

12. Lyman McConnell contributed to Reclamation's oral history work on the Newlands Project.

13. Gail Bingham contributed to Reclamation's oral history work on the Newlands Project.

### **Gail Bingham Hired as Mediator**

Reid: You needed somebody that had no political agenda, and Paul, fine man that he is, was Chairman of the National Republican Party, and no matter what he did would be suspect. First of all, Paul wouldn't have done it. Secondly, it wouldn't have been a good idea.

Seney: What do you have in mind next for the project?

What's going on in terms of your thinking now?

Reid: Oh, I have no plans in mind. We're just going to let the negotiated settlement go forward. There are things taking place as we speak. I have nothing to do.

Seney: I have to ask you what you mean by that, Senator, when you say things are taking place as we speak.

Reid: Well, in the law, as it's written, there has to be implementation, and that's going forward.

Seney: Apparently the Justice Department and Interior

Department are getting ready to file the recoupment suit.

Reid: That's what I understand.

Seney: Is this something they'd give you a call about and check with you on or keep you abreast of?

Reid: I'm sure they will let me know. They don't have to get my authority to file it. They're going to file it.

Seney: A matter of courtesy.

Reid: Yeah, they would let me know, but they have legal responsibilities to do that. They have to do that. They have no choice. It's just a question of when.

Seney: Thank you, Senator. I know you have to go.

Reid: Yes. I'm sorry. There are a lot of things I'd like to visit with you more, but that's all the time I have.

Seney: I appreciate that. I thank you.

END SIDE 2, TAPE 1. NOVEMBER 6, 1995.  
END OF INTERVIEW.