



# Nampa & Meridian Irrigation District

By Daren Coon

The Nampa & Meridian Irrigation District (NMID) is a water storage, conveyance, distribution, and drainage system that supplies irrigation water to 69,000 acres of farms and lawns in Canyon and Ada Counties of southwestern Idaho. Since its founding at the turn of the last century, NMID has delivered water to both small, highly productive farms and a steadily growing urban environment in Idaho's Treasure Valley.

NMID operates and maintains more than 500 miles of canals and drains to deliver water to variety of crops, including sugar beets, alfalfa, beans, and flower seeds, while thousands of miles of pressurized pipe services portions of three cities and 367 subdivisions. NMID's primary responsibility is simple: to operate and maintain the district's infrastructure and ensure the delivery of irrigation water.

## History

In 1905, NMID acquired the right, title, and interest to a canal company that was the predecessor of NMID. The acquired water rights date back to the 1860s and are some of the oldest in the state of Idaho. The canal company's original stockholders and investors—the same owners of the railroad companies that helped open up the West—were from out East, mostly the Philadelphia area. But private enterprise was not able to make it over the long haul. What was needed was a political subdivision or entity that had the right of assessment and did not have to rely on outside investors to underwrite the expense of construction and maintenance. The formation of NMID brought management home to the water users of the Treasure Valley—those making a living off the water.

In 1909, the Reclamation Service moved in at the request of Treasure Valley water users to build



Arrowrock Dam.

reservoirs along the Boise River. After dedicating years to surveying and research, the Reclamation Service decided on the Arrowrock Dam, which was completed by 1911. At the time, the arched concrete dam was the tallest concrete structure in the world. NMID and four other districts became the beneficiaries of the water stored behind the Arrowrock.

As time passed, NMID's river and storage rights became inadequate to irrigate more acres, so efforts were undertaken to expand storage. Anderson Ranch Dam was completed after World War II and provides three times as much storage as Arrowrock Reservoir. Then, in the late 1950s the Army Corps of Engineers built Lucky Peak Dam primarily for flood control purposes, although subsequently, several irrigation districts acquired permanent irrigation storage rights in the reservoir. There is also an offline storage reservoir, Deer Flat Reservoir, that receives its water from the New York Canal. It is a shallow, warm-water body that reregulates water to NMID and also serves as a wildlife refuge.

Around 1910, the Reclamation Service recognized that it was bringing a lot of water to NMID and surrounding districts without sufficient drainage. District lands were water soaked and decreased in productivity. The water users called for Congress to authorize the financing of a drainage project in NMID. Hundreds of miles of drains were necessary to take the irrigation water back to the Boise River. The project began in 1911 and was nearly complete by 1920. Today, NMID has the unique distinction of being both irrigation and drainage.

## At the Intersection of Agriculture and Urbanization

NMID has been dealing with the effects of urbanization since the early 1900s. For an irrigation district in Idaho, the end goal is to deliver irrigation water to the lands in the district that have a water right apportioned to them. So NMID has moved along and modified its behavior to accommodate an increase in population and all that comes along with it—everything from crossings and encroachments to discharges into our drainage facilities. For our district, it was an evolutionary process, not a revolutionary one.

While there has been this change from agriculture to urbanization, water rights remain appurtenant to the land irrespective of how or whether the water is put to use. NMID has structured its contracts with Reclamation to talk about *irrigation*—you won't find the words *agriculture* or *cultivation* in any of our contracts—they truly are construction contracts for irrigation. And under Idaho law, within an irrigation district, choosing not to use the water does not mean the water right has been forfeited. You can't punish an entity and other water users if one user does not



Completed replacement flume for the Fogarty Lateral across the New York Canal in a rural area of Nampa.



Concrete lining of the Ridenbaugh Canal prior to additional commercial development in suburban Boise.



One of many concrete-lined sections of the Ridenbaugh Canal.

put his or her water to use.

To put urban growth in NMID into perspective, from January 1990 to this past December, NMID signed off on 1,194 pressure urban irrigation system construction contracts. There are 14,706 tracts of land covering 5,383 acres in Ada and Canyon Counties, which are subject to NMID's pressure systems. That number expands on a monthly basis.

NMID provides irrigation water to three cities, which in turn pressurize and turn out to urban and suburban lots. Nampa City, the largest at 7,154 acres, is probably single largest urban distribution system in the entire West. NMID's first agreement with Nampa City for delivery



Drum filter for pressure urban irrigation system, Meridian.



New check structure on Ridenbaugh Canal adjacent to commercial development, Boise.



Finch lateral intake and diversion structure, Boise.

of water was signed in 1920, and its first agreement with Nampa City as a municipal irrigation district was signed in 1939. On the other end of our service area is Boise, whose municipal irrigation district is very small, at 42.3 acres.

Our district comprises 2,660 subdivisions covering 60,000 tracts of land. Back in 1976, there were roughly 27,000 tracts. NMID also serves 1,300 acres owned by Simplot and Micron in southeastern Boise. Those lands use part of the water for irrigation and manufacturing. Micron takes its part of the surface water, cleans it to water quality standards, injects it into a sealed aquifer, and then removes it for memory chip manufacturing.

Agricultural use of the water is not necessarily held in any higher esteem than any other use of the water. NMID's focus is on operating and maintaining the distribution system. NMID's board reflects that mentality and represents a diversity of backgrounds. Members who do not have a direct agricultural connection often have an indirect one. In fact, one of our longest-serving members began his life on the farm, but wound up becoming president of one of the largest banks in Idaho.

## Present and Future Challenges

Federal and state regulations governing water supply and water quality are developing and evolving. The direct and indirect impacts of those regulations on NMID's ability to maintain and operate the irrigation and drainage system are a challenge. Often, such regulations obligate a district or a farmer to certain behaviors that are not characteristic of the district or not committed to law.

Among the requirements with the greatest effect on NMID are National Pollution Discharge Elimination System permits, Federal Emergency Management Agency floodplain administration regulations, and the continuous changes to the Bureau of Reclamation's directives and standards. It is extremely important to pay attention to all the details of a rule proposal or promulgation. Inevitably, some bureaucrat somewhere down the line will reinterpret the rule—and what you thought was the case 20 years ago is no longer the case today.

Today, the biggest challenge for an irrigation district is urbanization. It is our job to consistently educate newcomers about the purpose of the district. Ultimately, our goal is to stay true to the purpose of the district.

*Daren Coon is the secretary-treasurer and secretary of the board of Nampa & Meridian Irrigation District. He has been with the district for 38 years. You can reach Daren at (208) 466-7861 or [Dcoon@nmid.org](mailto:Dcoon@nmid.org).*

