



Work Progresses on Elephant Butte Pilot Channel

As the drought focuses more attention on water in our state, government agencies are coming together to work on cooperative solutions. The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation (Bureau) and the Interstate Stream Commission (ISC) have launched a river channel excavation and maintenance project, in the area formerly occupied by the reservoir, called the Pilot Channel. Since 1999, with drought reducing inflow to the reservoir and with farmers below Elephant Butte Reservoir calling for annual irrigation deliveries, the reservoir has receded south over 18 miles exposing a delta of mud, water, and skeleton Salt Cedar trees. Work on the Pilot Channel continues.

Benefits of the Pilot Channel

- ◆ **meeting compact obligations** -- It is critical for conveying water through the delta to the reservoir. Any lack of connection between the river and reservoir can contribute to significant under-delivery of water that must be provided to meet compact needs.
- ◆ **minimizing evaporation** -- An excavated and maintained channel significantly reduces evaporation losses.
- ◆ **maximizing water delivery** -- The channel aids in the delivery of water to the reservoir, helping to maintain the water level for recreational enthusiasts and providing water to New Mexicans and Texans living south of Elephant Butte Reservoir in the Rio Grande Valley. (Fifty-seven percent of the Rio Grande Project supply of water is used in state to provide water for New Mexico farmers.)



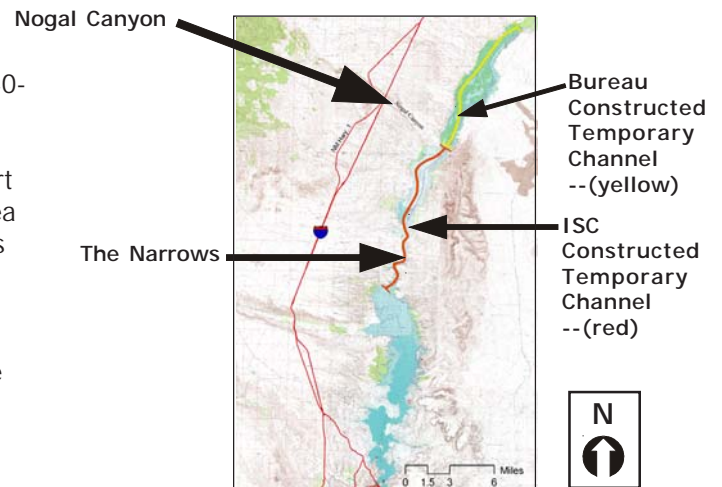
Aerial view of Pilot Channel in April 2003.



Aerial View of Completed Pilot Channel in February 2004.

History of Work

- ◆ **2000** - The Bureau began construction of a 7.5-mile channel with a downstream end at Nogal Canyon, following several years of design and coordination with other agencies as well as environmental permitting.
- ◆ **2002** - When the reservoir pool was projected to recede further, the Bureau with ISC assistance obtained environmental permits to work between Nogal Canyon and the downstream end of the area called the Narrows. The Bureau issued license agreements to the ISC and the ISC hired Wilco Marsh Buggies of Louisiana to excavate and maintain eleven miles of the channel.
- ◆ **2003** - The Bureau continued construction of the 7-mile section of channel on the northern end of the reservoir about 240-foot wide and 2-foot deep. Wilco Marsh Buggies constructed a 4.5-mile section to a 150-foot width and 2- to 4-foot depth from Nogal Canyon to the ponded area. Since June 2003, the ISC effort focused on completing a 50-foot channel through the ponded area and on removing all obstructions through the Narrows which was completed in October of 2003.
- ◆ **2004** - Plans for future work in the area by the ISC staff depending on funding, which include ongoing maintenance of the channel downstream of Nogal Canyon to its full design specifications, construction of up to 8 to 10 additional miles of channel south of the narrows, and maintenance of both.



Map of Elephant Butte Pilot Channel