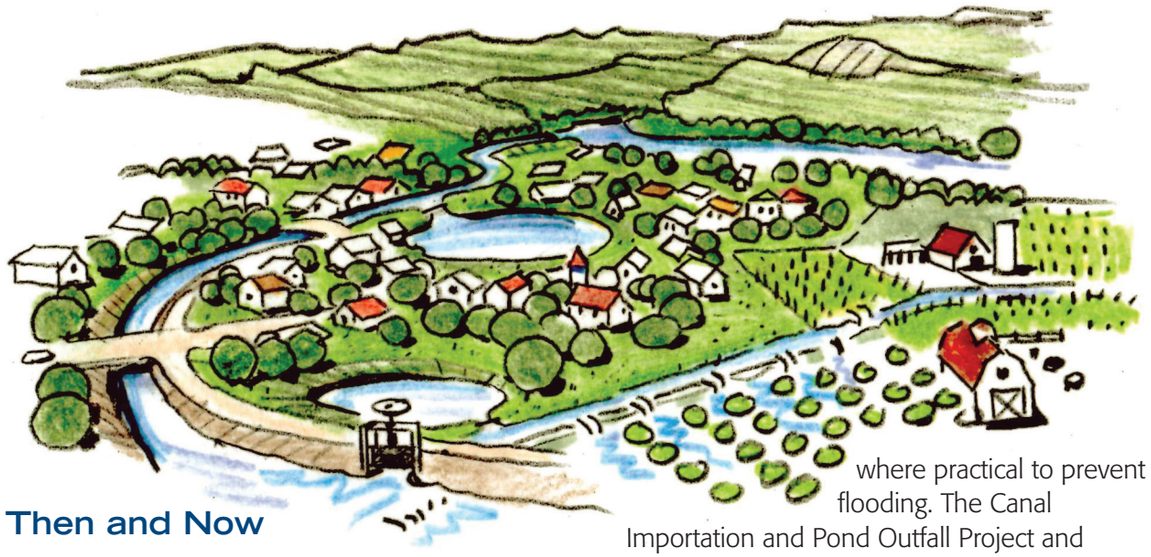


Then and Now

Irrigation ditches, or canals, carry water from the Cache la Poudre River to users in and around Fort Collins. The ditch water is used for irrigation instead of treated water by Colorado State University, City of Fort Collins parks and golf courses, Poudre School District, local businesses such as Hewlett-Packard/Agilent and Woodward Governor, homeowners' associations for greenbelts, area farmers and private citizens. Since the 1860s, this system of irrigation ditches has played an important role in the development of the Cache la Poudre valley. Today, by irrigating with untreated ditch water, these entities are promoting sustainability and water conservation.

The first ditches were small structures built by farmers to divert water from the river to irrigate nearby farm fields. In the late 1800s, ditches were enlarged and extended to irrigate land further from the river. Today, much of the irrigated land has been developed so irrigation ditches also carry stormwater (water from rainstorms that collect on streets and low-lying areas) from these areas in addition to the diverted water. Fort Collins Utilities is evaluating options to separate irrigation and storm runoff where practical to prevent flooding. The Canal Importation and Pond Outfall Project and Sheldon Lake Improvements are examples of projects that removed storm runoff from ditches.

The City routinely receives questions about the operation and maintenance of irrigation ditches. The need for maintenance is increasing, in part due to the illegal dumping of trash and debris along ditch banks and into the ditches. Because irrigation ditches provide many benefits to our community, we ask you to help us keep them clean.

Ownership

Typically, the water in ditches is owned by shareholders in non-profit irrigation companies run by a board of directors. Shareholders have the right to use a portion of the water. The board hires a superintendent to oversee the operation and maintenance of the ditches. The land the ditches are on is often owned by adjacent property owners. The irrigation companies have easements that give them the legal right, but not necessarily the obligation, to maintain the ditches and ditch banks to ensure they can deliver water to their shareholders.

Maintenance

Water flows in the ditches primarily when it is needed and available for irrigation or storage in lakes and reservoirs, or sometimes after a large storm. In April or May, the gates are opened on the Poudre River and water flows into the ditches.

Ditches are maintained by the irrigation companies. The most common maintenance problem is accumulated trash, branches, grass and other debris. When the water is running, it picks up this debris and carries it downstream where it clogs gates and grates and may cause flooding. Access along the sides of ditches is necessary to remove the debris. Maintenance generally occurs in the spring before the ditches begin carrying water, but it can occur any time of the year.

Trees, brush and weeds growing along the banks interfere with ditch access and also contribute to bank erosion and seepage. To remedy these problems, vegetation often is burned along the banks in the spring. When trees become a problem, they are usually removed.

Benefits and Responsibilities

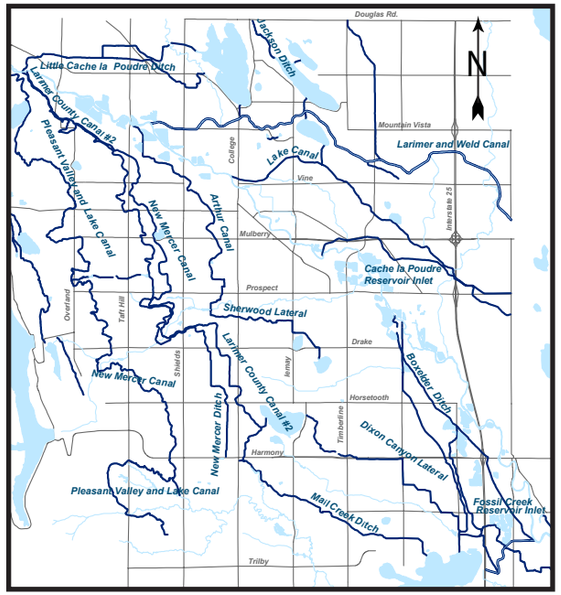
Even if you are not a shareholder of an irrigation company or have a direct use the water carried in the ditches, you receive benefits indirectly. Stormwater generated from your neighborhood may end up in one of the ditches. Residents along ditches may see them as habitat for a variety of wildlife or a natural area to enjoy. In the bigger picture, you may benefit from harvests of irrigated farm fields. Everyone benefits but, with benefits, also comes responsibilities.

The City and irrigation companies ask that you do your part and do not deposit trash in the ditches or along the banks. Some debris occurs naturally, like tree branches, leaves and undergrowth. However, debris generated by people, like grass clippings, tires, used oil, solvents and pesticides, also ends up in the

ditches and pollutes adjacent streams and lakes as well. It takes time and money to clean the ditches before the water reaches its final destination. It is prohibited by City Code to deposit waste in open areas or irrigation ditches.

Feeding wildlife along ditches is highly discouraged because a ready food supply attracts rats and other rodents. No one, especially children, should play in or around ditches, especially when water is flowing as banks can give way and a person could fall into the water. Swimmers and 'tubers' can get caught in the flow or may get trapped in a culvert.

Maintenance performed by the irrigation companies at times may seem to be in conflict with the community's environmental and wildlife values. Property owners may object to the irrigation company removing trees, or expect the irrigation company to remove trees that are actually the property owner's responsibility. The



Irrigation ditches and canals in the Fort Collins area

irrigation companies have the legal right and the need to run water and maintain the ditches. These issues can be difficult to resolve, and the appropriate actions and sharing of responsibility depend on the specific circumstances. However, when the City, irrigation companies and citizens work together, shareholders' needs can be met while wildlife and environmental benefits are preserved for residents.

Who to Call

Many City departments, listed below, are involved with irrigation ditches. For your convenience, irrigation company contact information also is listed.

City of Fort Collins

- Forestry (tree planting, pruning, removal) 221-6360
- Natural Resources (wildlife and habitat) 221-6600
- Stormwater (storm drainage) 221-6700
- Streets (weeds, trash, rodents, rubbish) 221-6615

Irrigation Companies

- John Moen, 218-0726
  Arthur Ditch, Larimer County Ditch #2, New Mercer Ditch, Warren Lake Ditch
- Justin Green, 420-7503, Lake Canal
- Bill Johnston, 482-7671, Larimer-Weld Canal
- Ed Wendell, 226-4795, cell 214-7085
  Pleasant Valley Lake and Canal

City of Fort Collins Utilities
Utilities for the 21st Century
fcgov.com/utilities • utilities@fcgov.com
(970) 221-6700 • TDD: (970) 224-6003

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City of Fort Collins Utilities

Irrigation Ditches