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Irrigation funds flow freely

Western farmers pay just a fraction of \$7.1 billion tab

By Jim Abrams
The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Federal subsidies and various loopholes have allowed Western farmers to pay for only a fraction of their allocated share of the cost of irrigation projects they use, government auditors say.

The General Accounting Office said in a report published yesterday that irrigators' share of costs for 133 water projects in 17 Western states was \$7.1 billion.

As of September 1994, the report said, irrigators had paid less than \$1 billion, although they generally had kept up with their obligations and paid what they were billed.

The difference has been made up through federal subsidies, fees transferred to other sources such as power companies and legislation specifically relieving irrigators of their obligations, said the GAO, Congress' investigative wing.

"At a time when Congress has told farmers in other parts of the country to prepare to give up their heavy diet of federal subsidies, water subsidies that benefit farmers only in the West remain untouched," said Rep. George Miller, D-Calif., who commissioned the report.

Miller, top Democrat on the House Resources Committee, has been a leader in efforts to restructure water distribution in the West and raise the fees for grazing and

mining on federal lands. His campaign has met strong opposition from other Western lawmakers.

Miller said he was proposing legislation that would require farmers to pay the full costs of any new Bureau of Reclamation projects that bring irrigation waters to their lands.

The GAO report said that since the beginning of the century, the federal government has spent \$21.8 billion to build 133 water projects in the West.

The Bureau of Reclamation considers \$16.9 billion of that reimbursable, with \$7.1 billion in costs allocated to irrigators.

Subsidies and other forms of re-

lief have reduced that amount to \$3.4 billion, of which irrigators have so far repaid \$945 million.

Farmers are not required to begin paying until 10 years after they start drawing water and have 40 years to complete payment. The report said irrigators have paid or are scheduled to pay their full allocated share of construction costs for only 14 of the 133 projects.

Republican budget-cutters joined with environmentalists last week to eliminate the \$10 million budget to begin construction of the Animas-La Plata water project in Colorado. That project would ultimately cost the government \$400 million.