

JAKE GUST

Fargo, North Dakota

Jake Gust came to his work with The International Coalition (TIC) with much firsthand experience with managing river waters. During his time on the West Fargo City Commission in the 1960s, 70s and 80s, the city dealt with flooding year after year. Jake says that it took West Fargo 35 years to find a solution to its flooding problems, which consists today of a diversion of the Sheyenne River via a permanent structure around the city. Today, Jake says, West Fargo has the best flood protection of any city in the Red River Basin. Jake's many years of farming and service on the North Dakota State Water Commission have added to his awareness of water management. Jake was an original member of The International Coalition (TIC) and continues today on the Red River Basin Commission (RRBC) as director for North Dakota at large.

A defining issue during Jake's work with TIC was flooding. TIC came into being following the 1979 flood, Jake explains, when people realized it was difficult to build flood control projects on their own. He points out that the Red River Basin's flat terrain and the temperature differences as the water flows north, complicated by the location of communities near the river, makes for difficulties in managing flood waters. And today, he continues, a number of these communities, which were originally built along the river when it was a source of transportation, have grown much larger, making more people frustrated about the flooding. Finding ways to approach this major issue and others, Jake explains, constituted a major problem for TIC 25 years ago given the lack of consensus along the Red River, and the organization has done much work reaching out to find common ground among the people.

Today, the defining issues of the organization have broadened, Jake says. In particular, he points to the issue of water supply and future shortages that will occur because of increased demands fueled by value-added farm production along with population growth. This challenge of water supply, he suggests, may require controversy resolution fully as much as with the problem of flooding.

Jake sees TIC's grassroots approach to finding solutions as important. "If people don't talk about the problem, then the solution cannot be found," he says. "Money alone won't fix the problems in the Basin—it takes consensus." Jake points out that state and federal agencies will not allocate resources unless people come to agreement on the definition of and solution to a problem. It is the RRBC's challenge to bring us together in finding solutions, he says.

In Jake's eyes, the RRBC is still important today, for "water management is an ongoing process." Even when solutions are arrived at, he explains, new problems are only going to emerge. Jake's vision for the organization is for it to become a model for getting people together to discuss tough issues and work towards consensus. He points out that people won't vote for or be willing to spend money on projects they don't understand. "If people feel that projects are important," he says, "they will support what is waiting to be done."

