

A TREASURE OF THE CONFLUENT : OUR IRRIGATION CANALS

1. A LITTLE HISTORY

One of the first references to the canals of Prades dates to 1305. It is the granting of a licence of take water from springs at *d'en Gornier* and from the river *Têt*, by Jacques, King of Majorca, Count of Roussillon and of Cerdagne, to the *université de Prades* and to its inhabitants for watering their land. This is the "right to water". This right was maintained and asserted while the canals were being developed over the centuries, despite numerous major setbacks in the 19th century caused by the increase and the diversification of water use.



From the 1930s to the 1960s, numerous infrastructure projects were completed: viaducts, siphons, tunnels and extensions. But since the year 2000 and an undeniable withdrawal by the state, it is becoming more and more difficult to envisage large projects which are nonetheless essential.

2. SOME USEFUL DEFINITIONS

The **main branch** of the canal is owned by all the users, members of an association (ASA, see section 3). The association pays the property tax. No-one

has the right to meddle with the canal infrastructure (modifying, drilling holes...), nor diverting it.

The **secondary branches** of the canal are owned, depending on the situation, by individuals, communes or the state whose plots are crossed by these branches. They should be regularly maintained by the waterside plot owners. The "**œils**" are openings in the canal equipped with sluice gates allowing the splitting and diversion of water flows.

The ASA has **right of way** to maintain the main branch canal as do waterside property owners to maintain secondary branches. It is not a public footpath; this is only for access to the sluice gates for the users concerned.

The **right of passage of water** relates to the application of the water law stipulating that water must be allowed to circulate freely from one plot owner to another. Plot owners cannot cut off a branch, ever modify the diameter of the canal or reduce it which could cause overflows.

A **timetable** may be defined with precise days and hours for watering. When the allocated period for watering is over, the sluice gates must be reset so that the next users can take their turn to water.

User obligation: all waterside users of the main branch canal must install a drain along the lower edge of the canal on their plots. This will prevent damage due to dampness or leaks coming from the canal or elsewhere.

3. SO WHO MANAGES THESE CANALS ?

The canals of Prades (Old branch) are managed by an "Association Syndicale Autorisée" (ASA, directed by a governmental order 01-07-2004).

An ASA is under guardianship of the state and is authorized by a Prefectural announcement. The

most important administrative actions such as setting budgets or the deliberations of the general meeting of owners are checked for legality by the state. Here the checks for legality are done by the DDTM (Direction départementale des Territoires et de la Mer) and the ASA follows the rules of public service accounting.

The treasurer of an ASA is a public service tax collector appointed by the Paymaster General: so everything is therefore very well regulated.



For the distribution of water, every water intake is equipped with a sluice gate that allows control of the flow rate:

- the locking and unlocking of the "œils" of the main canal taking water to the secondary branches is the job of the canal supervisor ("garde-vanne") according to the timetable.
- On the other hand, on secondary branches and channels, the users may operate the sluice gates at times set by the timetable.

4. HOW DOES THE ASA WORK ?

The objective of the ASA is to manage the operation and maintenance of the main branch of the canal, including carrying out major repair work, improvement projects or extensions that could be deemed necessary.

The ASA is composed of all those who own plots within the perimeter irrigated by the canal, irrespective of whether they are built up or not, or farmed or not.

This canal perimeter was defined during the creation of the ASA (the oldest ASA in the Conflent dates back to the 12th century). As soon as you become the owner of a plot within this perimeter, you become a member of the ASA (or licensee). It is an obligation associated with the plot and not a choice by the owner, whether you use the irrigation or not. The **governing body** of the ASA is composed of volunteer members ("Syndics") elected by all the owners, who are members of the ASA, during the bi-annual general meeting.



5. AND WITH WHAT RESOURCES ?

Every member of an ASA is legally obliged to pay the **tax** ("redevance syndicale") essential for the budget of the ASA. This actually a canal maintenance tax that is decoupled from the usage or access to the water. By way of information, the total budget of the Prades ASA is around 200,000 €/year which comes essentially from this tax. Moreover, Prades ASA employs two staff for the administration service (costs shared with 32 other

ASAs in the Conflent) and two staff for the technical management of the canal improvement projects, development and maintenance.

6. WHAT OUR CANALS ARE AND WHAT THEY ARE NOT.

These canals are essentially destined for irrigation, even though some facilities for exploiting the energy exist or are under study: micro-hydroelectric and photovoltaic power generation.

Secondarily, they serve to drain away rainwater but these days are insufficient for this purpose. In fact, artificial surfaces covered by concrete and asphalt, urban sprawl and modified rainfall patterns have considerably increased the peak flow rates saturating the capacity of our water channels. Nor are they outfalls for discharging any kind of debris, waste water or any other waste including leaves or branches.

A reminder here of the rule about connecting dwellings to the **sewer network**. From 1st January 2011, the law "Grenelle II de juillet 2010", stipulates that to sell a house, the vendor is obliged to provide in his technical file ("dossier de diagnostic technique (DDT)"), a report and/or diagnosis concerning the drains. Except where it is physically impossible in town, this report is concerned with checking and confirming the connection of the drains to the sewer network.

7. THE FUTURE DEPENDS ON US

With development and urbanisation of our communes, new canal users are being added to the farmers: new individual users who sometimes discover when they acquire their plot that it is served by the canal.

Indeed, while a canal that is used properly guarantees its users low-cost water, available in

quantity and good for the local environment, using it properly requires know-how that can't be improvised and needs everyone's attention.

For further information, you can request at the ASA office the currently applicable "**Règlement de Service-BA**" or download this from the website. And regularly check the website for updates on canal operation.



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