



## **AAWRE Remembers Inaugural Honorary Diplomat, John Keys, III**



**John W. Keys, III, P.E., Hon.D.WRE**  
1942 – 2008

**John W. Keys, III, P.E., Hon.D.WRE**, one of the first Honorary Diplomat of the Academy and former U.S. Bureau of Reclamation Commissioner died on May 30, 2008, in a plane crash in the Canyonlands National Park in Utah.

Mr. Keys, 66, a longtime pilot, was flying on a sightseeing trip over the park's Needles District in Utah.

John Keys was appointed in 2001 to head the Bureau of Reclamation that built 600 dams across 17 Western states, including Arrowrock, Grand Coulee and Hoover. The Bureau of Reclamation, established in 1902, is the agency responsible for the agricultural development of the Boise River Valley. Mr. Keys stepped down as commissioner of the Reclamation in 2006, after a 40-year-career that included 18 years in Boise as Pacific Northwest Regional Director.

The Reclamation's projects irrigate 10 million acres of land and provide water to 140,000 farmers in the West. As commissioner, John oversaw the agency with more than 5,000 employees and a budget of nearly \$800 million. He began his career with the Reclamation as a civil engineer in 1964.

A hobby and life passion of Keys', John averaged more than 300 hours a year of volunteer flights before he returned to the Reclamation. He also served as a college and high school sports referee. John's wife, Dell, is a family physician who also flies.

Darell Zimbelman, Ph.D., P.E., D.WRE, F.ASCE, former associate general manager of Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District and AAWRE Founding Trustee stated, “John Keys was an inspiration to all civil engineers. He excelled at what he did and dedicated his life to improving the quality of life for the citizens in the 17 western states. His career as a dedicated federal employee and volunteer is a model for all.”

Keys was well known for his ability to work and communicate with various interest and polarized groups who fight over water in the West. Keys’ diligence, hard-bargaining, and human negotiation skills resulted in a new agreement between the states of Colorado, Nevada, Arizona and California over management of the short supplies of water in Colorado River. His deft handling of the politically sensitive issue of using Idaho water to aid salmon migration brought praise from both water users and environmentalists.

Keys was awarded Interior's highest honor - the Distinguished Service Award - for maintaining open lines of communication and keeping interest groups focused on solutions in 1995.

At John’s retirement remarks from the Reclamation in 2006, he stated, “It has been my absolute pleasure to serve as your commissioner of Reclamation for the last five years,” he said. “While I have thoroughly enjoyed working with the Bureau and being part of Secretary Norton’s excellent Interior team, the time has arrived for me to retire again. It is time for me to return to Utah, fire up my trusty airplane, and be a good grandpa to our three grand children. I also want to get back to flying for the charter service that I worked with before, re-up as a volunteer in Arches National Park, return to flying for Angel Flight, and catch a few more C.A.S.T. [Catch a Special Thrill for Kids] events.”

John was a native of Sheffield, Alabama, and he received a bachelor's degree in civil engineering from the Georgia Institute of Technology in 1964, and a master's degree in 1971 from Brigham Young University in Utah.

John is survived by his wife, Dell, of 45 years; two children, Katherine Crawford of Montrose, Colorado, and Robin Fisher of Boise, Idaho; his mother, Alma Keys of Muscle Shoals, Alabama, and three grandchildren.

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