Although his written speech did not address Glen Canyon Dam, Secretary Babbitt adjusted his comments for the conference, traditionally attended only by water users, to include the statement, “Glen Canyon Dam is not in any danger of coming down.” However, when speaking with Ms. Force after his speech, Secretary Babbitt indicated that he was pleased that environmental interests were involved in the Glen Canyon Dam and other Colorado River issues. Before leaving, he accepted a copy of Living Rivers Currents and a “Drain ‘Lace’ Powell Now!” bumper sticker.

The presumably precarious longevity of the Endangered Species Act (ESA) under the new Bush Administration was the central topic of Secretary Babbitt’s presentation. He indicated that in the past, many have tried to blame the Act for river and land management problems. “They said ‘the ESA is the problem. Let’s go after the ESA,'” said Secretary Babbitt. “I want to counsel you on my way out, it won’t work. They tried it. They got nowhere for two reasons: It ain’t true and public support [for the ESA] is strong.”

Secretary Babbitt also expressed concern for the Salton Sea, a 13-by-15-mile natural depression in the Southern California desert, that accidentally filled with Colorado River water in 1905 and has since become the world’s largest inland lake. When restoration activists hot the road in March, they will be promoting available solutions to reverse the federal and state polices that allow billions of gallons of water to flow off industrial hay fields, tumble over desert fountains, or evaporate off water-ski parks.

The region’s thirty percent population growth anticipated over the next half century. Meanwhile, salinity levels in the Lower Basin have reduced irrigation efficiency, species have become endangered throughout the basin, and the river’s internationally recognized delta has all but disappeared. Similar problems led to the demise of once-thriving Native American cultures utilizing extensive irrigation schemes in Utah and Arizona. When restoration activists hit the road in March, they will be promoting available solutions to reverse the federal and state policies that allow billions of gallons of water to flow off industrial hay fields, tumble over desert fountains, or evaporate off water-ski parks.

We want their missions to change from consumption, to conserva-

(continued on page 2)
Representatives of the Republic of Mexico and the United States signed a historic agreement on December 12, 2000, bringing the long-held vision of a restored Colorado River delta one step closer to reality. However, the lack of any specific requirements for water deliveries from the US for restoration purposes has raised some concerns as to the strength of this agreement.

To increase the likelihood that the intent of this binational agreement could be implemented, GCAN and others are mobilizing a “One Percent For the Delta” campaign. The groups are asking the major users of Colorado River water to commit to providing the minimum flows considered necessary by scientists to begin the restoration process. “All that is needed to get this process moving forward is for the water users to pledge, at a minimum, 32,000 acre-feet per year, with an additional 250,000 acre-feet every four years to replenish the Mexican delta region,” says David Hogan, Desert Rivers Coordinator with the Center for Biological Diversity. “That is less than one percent of more than 13 million acre-feet the United States diverts from the Colorado River annually.”

News of the signing of the agreement was announced by outgoing Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt in a speech to the Colorado River Water Users Association in Las Vegas, where he indicated his interest in restoring the biologically impoverished area. Thirty days later, however, he signed a policy document that could impede progress. Known as the “Surplus Criteria” for the lower Colorado River, the policy calls for diverting water that might otherwise flow to the delta during years of high flows. The so-called “surplus” water will, under the new criteria, be drawn from Lake Mead reservoir for use by California.

The new plan reflects a compromise among the seven basin states to permit California to continue making excessive withdrawals from the river—well above its legal limit—for 15 more years, for storage in off-stream reservoirs. California has committed, in turn, to reduce its annual diversions by nearly a million acre-feet beginning in 2015.

“But the delta needs water now,” adds Hogan. “We have to send a strong message to the Bureau of Reclamation to apply pressure on these water users to reduce their consumption in the near term, if the delta is to survive over the long term.”

Department of Interior officials have declared their intent to organize the first binational meeting on the new delta agreement in Spring 2001. The purpose is to identify and discuss scientific, technical, and legal issues relevant to Colorado River estuary restoration. In addition to obtaining commitments from the water users, assurances also need to be obtained from Mexico that this water will actually flow to the delta, and not be diverted along the way.

The basinwide organizing effort now getting underway will encourage water agencies to participate in these proceedings in good faith and to voluntarily contribute their share of Colorado River water toward the goals agreed upon by the scientific community.

So far, opposition to any significant allocation for the delta has been fierce. Water users have enjoyed near-total control of the Colorado River’s plumbing system for decades. But despite the many obstacles, environmental groups remain committed to the goal of restoring the fish, wildlife, and vegetation that made the delta a special place for thousands of years.

GCAN is calling on all water users in the basin to voluntarily allocate one percent of each user’s allocated share to restore delta flows. GCAN will take to the road in March with its “Sustainable Water Project” to visit cities, water users, and agencies throughout the basin, asking for a commitment to sharing the responsibility for restoration. In addition to the initial one percent, we also are asking water users to ensure sufficient flows are maintained for the Cienega de Santa Clara wetland, and that they support additional water to the delta region when such water becomes available through purchase or voluntary agreement.

With a corresponding commitment to conserving water at the tap and at the sprinkler head, the consumers of Colorado River water can easily accommodate the needs of the thirsty denizens of the delta.

Restoration Roadshow (continued from page 1)

“Their wasteful practices are perpetuating a water crisis that need not be,” says GCAN president John Weisheit. “Their wasteful practices are perpetuating a water crisis that need not be.”

Twenty percent of the Colorado’s flow is presently utilized to meet human needs. According to the United States Geological Survey, per capita water use by people in California, Nevada, Arizona and New Mexico ranges from 20 to 120 percent above the national average of 101 gallons per day. Israel, by contrast, manages on only 75 gallons per person per day. Conservation and reuse strategies could bring water usage in the region to as low as 34 gallons per person, per day—meeting population increases, putting water back into the river while still providing for our needs.

Farmers too can mend their ways. Agriculture utilizes nearly 80% of the Colorado’s flow. Much of this is for flood irrigation for water intensive and low value crops such as alfalfa or cotton. This occurs because although people in Los Angeles may pay $6.00 per acre-foot for Colorado River water, farmers are only paying $13. Altered crop patterns and irrigation technologies are available to generate double-digit decreases in water consumption, yet Bullec and others are not making conservation a priority.

“Last year we rallied at Glen Canyon to usher in the Century of River Restoration,” adds GCAN’S Weisheit. “Now it’s time to take this message to people and agencies throughout the watershed, to conserve water for the river, and meet our responsibilities to future generations.” Weisheit’s team will be traveling with an empty water tanker truck dubbed “Vaquita Rescue.” It will take collections to deliver fresh water to the endangered vaquita porpoises in the Gulf of California, and to the endangered species of the Colorado River delta. This rolling water tank will also symbolize the hundreds of millions of similar-sized tanks of water wasted needlessly each year by municipal and agricultural water agencies.

Organizing for the Dying Delta

Roadshow for an Ecosystem, not an Economy
PIPE DREAMS:

Albuquerque’s Taste for Imported Water

Few travelers who pass over the Continental Divide on New Mexico’s US Highway 84 are aware of the subterranean tunnel beneath them, a pipeline more than twenty miles in length. Water that Nature intended to replenish the Colorado River’s estuary at the Gulf of California instead is diverted to alfalfa fields and subdivisions in the Rio Grande Valley.

The Azotea Tunnel, near the Colorado-New Mexico border, was constructed in the 1960s by the Bureau of Reclamation (BuRec) to deliver water from the San Juan River’s headwaters across the divide to the Chama River—a major tributary of the Rio Grande River. Boaters on the Chama and Rio Grande float on imported water that is used to augment New Mexico’s meager supply.

For years, the City of Albuquerque and City of Santa Fe have been paying into a BuRec fund to acquire this water. Neither city has yet used its contracted water, however, because ample existing groundwater supplies have not required developing the necessary infrastructure to divert their San Juan-Chama allocation from the Rio Grande.

But the current growth boom in Albuquerque has led City Hall to propose constructing an expensive water treatment facility that would allow the city to begin using its contracted water. Santa Fe’s existing water supplies have been depleted by recent drought conditions, and the State of New Mexico is threatening to block new development projects in the county unless the city begins drawing its San Juan-Chama allocation.

To complicate matters, imported water has been used in recent years to supplement flows in the Rio Grande below Albuquerque where irrigators have virtually drained the river dry; threatening the endangered Rio Grande silvery minnow with extinction. Farmers have managed to avoid cutbacks on deliveries by relying on San Juan-Chama water to maintain bare-minimum instream flows, but should Albuquerque begin utilizing its significant share, the survival of the river’s ecosystem could be further jeopardized.

Albuquerque’s proposal to divert its contracted water threatens the minnow in the short term, but continued growth and lack of conservation in the basin threaten the entire river in the longer term. While the city has begun implementing some significant conservation measures, there is much more that can be done.

Groups in the basin such as the Alliance for Rio Grande Heritage and Rio Grande Restoration are calling for adoption of the “Citizens Alternative” to the city’s development plan, and are focusing on the opportunity to achieve significant additional reductions in water usage instead of building additional capacity.

Since the tunnel was built, the Rio Grande and San Juan watersheds have become inextricably linked. One river—the San Juan—is being sacrificed in an effort to bandage the other. Two major developments are planned in the San Juan’s beleaguered watershed: the Animas-La Plata reservoir project and the Navajo-Gallup Pipeline. Conservation strategies, not more water development, must be put in place in both basins and this will be a major theme of GCAN’s upcoming road show as it rolls through New Mexico March 6-7.

COW-LORADO
River Storage Project

While the humpback chub, southwest willow flycatcher and vaquita porpoise are suffering from development of the Colorado River, cattle continue to fare quite well. Whether it’s irrigated pastures or industrial hay fields, the livestock industry remains the greatest beneficiary of federal and state programs diverting water from the Colorado.

From the Colorado Rockies to the Mexican border, alfalfa and other cattle feeds dominate much of the irrigated landscape. Alfalfa ranks just behind cotton in acreage cultivated in Arizona, and in Southern California, the largest consumer of Colorado River water, the Imperial Irrigation District devotes over 60% of its acreage to cattle feed.

But acreage planted represents only part of the story. Alfalfa is the most water-consuming crop grown, requiring almost twice as much water per acre as cotton, four times as much for carrots and eight times as much for lettuce. Accordingly, the value of consumptive crop grown, requiring almost twice as much water per acre as cotton, four times as much for carrots and eight times as much for lettuce. Accordingly, the value of

The problems associated with water management on the Colorado are not of supply, but a willingness to waste most of the river’s water on subsidies for the cattle industry. Such inefficiencies can easily be remedied by changing cropping patterns, changes that GCAN and others want to see mandated by Colorado River water agencies.
A long time ago in a beautiful eastern Sierra basin, a living lake was dying—the victim of a municipality hundreds of miles away with a voracious thirst. Mono Lake—a real lake, not a reservoir, and a destination point for millions of migratory birds—was slowly dying of thirst. Los Angeles had dams on four of the lake’s life-sustaining streams, diverting the water for the city’s parched throat. The lake was getting too salty and too low. The island refugees, used by nesting birds, were exposed to hungry predators, and dusty alkaline shores created air pollution. The line was drawn in the sand after the lake had lost forty vertical feet in 35 years; the surface area had declined by 30%, from 54,924 to 37,688 acres. No more, we declared! In 1978, a few citizens, led by the late David Gaines, started a crusade to save this ancient lake. Thus was born Mono Lake Committee, a great example of citizen action.

I was raised in Los Angeles and learned to love that special lake when visiting my father in Bishop (60 miles south) every summer. My environmental spirit soared at the possibility of saving a place I truly loved. Proudly, I became a charter member of that amazing group 25 years ago. We knew we could do battle with the water brokers. We were naive, simplistic, and over-heated with enthusiasm! You bet we were! We wanted to cut L.A.’s diversions by 85 per cent.

We started by getting the attention of everyone we could reach. Surprisingly, during the first “bucket walk” (Sept. 1980) we had both National Geographic and Smithsonian magazines record our act of returning the lake water we had collected in bottles headed for Los Angeles.

Ultimately Mono Lake Committee grew to 20,000 members, becoming a major political, legal, and consumer force. Finally, in 1994, the California Department of Water Resources ruled that the City of Los Angeles Department of Water and Power must dramatically cut its diversions, to allow the lake to fill to 23 feet below pre-diversion levels. This process is anticipated to take another 15 years, but I am pleased to report that the lake is again rising.

The Mono Lake Committee promoted conservation strategies to make up for the 83,000-acre-feet of water L.A. had previously diverted from the Lake annually. These strategies more than replaced the water the city can no longer divert. These are the same types of conservation strategies that can be implemented region-wide so that other natural areas, like Glen Canyon and the Colorado River delta, may also be restored.

But existing reservoirs are not enough for the water-skiing crowd of the Desert Southwest. Now they have taken their sport to their own backyard by excavating depressions into fragile desert landscapes; filling them with water to conveniently continue their clockwise direction around a track, similar to the chariots of Rome’s Circus Maximus.

Such a lifestyle is highly questionable. In desert climates, evaporation rates from reservoirs are extremely high. For example in Phoenix, the evaporation loss is 8 times greater than the annual rainfall, which is 10 inches per year. For a typical Phoenix-area swimming pool, that equates to 17,560 gallons of water lost to the atmosphere each year. Imagine the loss of water from a water-ski reservoir that has 30 acres of surface! Take a 4,000-gallon water truck, as used for GCAN’s Sustainable Water Project, and that equates to 14,342 trips per year to keep such a ski reservoir filled.

The environmental costs of these facilities don’t end with the waste of precious water. Many powerboats and jetskis run on polluting, two-cycle motors that foul both air and water. Thrilling, perhaps, but the cost of cleaning up the mess will be high.

As we look toward water conservation strategies to revive the Colorado and other rivers in the Southwest, clearly such wasteful parks should no longer be built. Evaporation losses are a key reason for advocating the draining of the water-ski park behind Glen Canyon Dam, and such waste should be considered before building any new water-ski infrastructure.