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## Leading Conservation Groups Offer Shortage Proposal For Colorado River

**'Conservation Before Shortage' proposal emphasizes short-term conservation to avoid abrupt disruptions in water deliveries.**

ENVIRONMENTAL DEFENSE - DEFENDERS OF WILDLIFE - NATIONAL WILDLIFE FEDERATION - PACIFIC INSTITUTE - SIERRA CLUB - SONORAN INSTITUTE

(July 18, 2005) Several non-governmental organizations today presented the Secretary of the Interior with a proposal for Colorado River drought management that will avoid drastic and uncompensated water shortages. Despite an April 30 deadline from the Secretary, the Colorado River basin states failed to agree on a plan for how to manage the river during times of shortage. The NGO proposal is submitted in anticipation of the Department of the Interior's first steps toward developing its own plan for sharing Colorado River shortage (see <http://www.usbr.gov/lc/region/g4000/docs/strategies.pdf>).

The proposal, titled "Conservation Before Shortage" can be downloaded at <http://www.environmentaldefense.org/go/CORiver>.

"The states are paralyzed by arguments with each other over water entitlements. They seem unable to craft a practical solution, and in the meantime stored water supplies have dwindled considerably," said Jennifer Pitt, a scientist with Environmental Defense. "Our shortage proposal offers a proactive approach that protects Colorado River water users and the environment from abrupt reductions in the amount of water available."

"It's hard to reach consensus when someone has to lose," said Peter Culp, an attorney with the Sonoran Institute in Arizona. "The current deadlock between the states reflects a zero-sum approach to river management, where one state or one water user is expected to shoulder the full burden of a drought by suffering a large, uncompensated shortage while other users are unaffected. Our proposal suggests a more cooperative, evenhanded approach to coping with drought."

"The "Conservation Before Shortage" policy proposal is based on the principle that shortage criteria should maximize the reliability and predictability of water deliveries on the Colorado River by introducing increased flexibility into the management of river resources when shortage conditions are imminent. The proposal establishes a voluntary, compensated water conservation program that minimizes the likelihood of large, uncompensated water shortages.

"Our approach spreads the burden of drought among many users, limiting the severity of water cutbacks on any single entity," said Michael Cohen, Senior Associate with the Pacific Institute. "It would create a predictable, rational system for water users, and distribute the costs between water and power users and the federal government."

"By planning for drought we see the double benefit of reducing the threat of large, involuntary water shortages and reducing the pressures on a river environment already stressed by drought," added Kara Gillon, staff attorney with Defenders of Wildlife.

"The failure of the states to address the need to cooperate in sharing shortages demands that a fair and objective proposal be put on the table" said James Wechsler, Chair of the Sierra Club's Southwest Waters Committee.

"Our proposal has the added benefit of protecting power generating capacity, while meeting the water conservation challenges that we face in the West," added Garrit Voggesser, Tribal Lands Specialist with the National Wildlife Federation.

The conservation groups are optimistic that as the Department of Interior considers

various shortage alternatives on the Lower Colorado River, the "Conservation Before Shortage" proposal will introduce a more flexible approach to river management that recognizes that even though the Colorado River has a wide variety of uses and benefits, the river can be managed in an equitable manner for both people and the environment.

Colorado River reservoirs are nearly half empty due to the extended drought that started in 2000, and the decline in quantity of water in storage is expected to continue. The Bureau of Reclamation projects that reservoir levels at Lake Mead could drop quickly towards the elevation at which power generation is compromised if the drought continues, and could fall below the elevation of Nevada's upper intakes or remain in a long-term decline that will be difficult to reverse until Lake Powell begins to re-fill.

"Conservation Before Shortage" addresses shortages before they occur by establishing requirements for water conservation in the Lower Colorado River basin that increase as the stored water supply declines. These requirements are based on a series of lake level triggers so that as Mead elevations lower, the quantity of water to be conserved would increase. The required amount of water would be conserved by offering to pay Colorado River water users, located anywhere in the Lower Colorado River basin or in Mexico, to voluntarily forbear water use. Funds to pay for forbearance would come from federal appropriations as well as a surcharge applied to Lower Basin water users and consumers of power generated at the Hoover Dam.

Conservation Before Shortage Benefits

Reduced need for new water projects. The introduction of flexibility into Colorado River management will allow those who are willing and able to reduce their water use to be compensated for doing so, and avoid the need to impose reductions in water use on those who cannot. By eliminating the potential for water shortages where they cannot easily be accommodated, this policy will limit the need for costly new water projects to protect water users that cannot tolerate interruptions in water supplies.

Protection of the environment. Fish, wildlife, and natural areas on the Colorado River do not, for the most part, have their own water rights. As such, they are "last in line" for water, and are the most vulnerable of all water users to drought. "Conservation Before Shortage" reduces overall water consumption in dry years, decreasing the risk of shortages that could disproportionately impact environmental uses in the future. Also, by increasing protection against shortage for water users that have inflexible demands, it will allow some water to remain in the river for the wildlife that needs it to survive while still meeting critical human needs.

Improved power production. Consistent maintenance of reservoir storage and power head above baseline conditions in average to low flow conditions will result in increased power production and improved power revenues, as well as elimination of the risk that elevations at Lake Mead will drop below minimum power head, improving the reliability of power production.

Increased certainty for water users. "Conservation Before Shortage" will significantly reduce the likelihood of involuntary and uncompensated shortages in the Lower Basin at levels above 500,000 acre-feet (the approximate level at which a shortage exceeds the ability of the Arizona Water Bank to readily buffer the shortage).

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Environmental Defense, a leading national nonprofit organization, represents more than 400,000 members. Since 1967, Environmental Defense has linked science, economics, law and innovative private-sector partnerships to create breakthrough solutions to the most serious environmental problems.

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