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States take wait-and-see approach

Nevada, Arizona, California won't touch surplus water while drought threat remains

By KEN RITTER THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

A wet winter has made a little more water available this year than last year to states that rely on the Colorado River, but Nevada, Arizona and California have agreed not to touch the surplus while the threat of drought still looms.

"The states are saying that at this time, they are not planning to take any additional water," said Terrence Fulp, area manager for the Bureau of Reclamation's lower Colorado River regional operations office in Boulder City. "We don't know if the drought is over or not."

Fulp's comments came as water officials from the seven states that share the Colorado met Monday at McCarran International Airport to provide input on the bureau's plans for operating the river in the coming year.

As part of the planning process, water administrators from Arizona, California and Nevada recently agreed not to tap the modest 300,000 acre-foot "domestic surplus" that the federal river management agency is projecting for the 2006 river year, which begins Oct. 1.

However, Arizona opposed holding a meeting next April to determine whether to change the amount of water released from the bureau's upstream Lake Powell reservoir, upon which Colorado, Utah, Wyoming and New Mexico rely.

Those upper-basin states favor a so-called "midyear review" of the 2006 operating plan like the one Interior Secretary Gale Norton conducted in April.

That is when Norton settled a dispute over water releases on the river, after the four upper-basin states argued that heavy winter rains had filled Lake Mead enough to justify an unprecedented reduction in water releases from Lake Powell, which had fallen to 34 percent capacity.

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...and Denver, which has risen to 67 percent capacity.

The Interior secretary sided with California, Arizona and Nevada. Those states maintained that holding water back at Lake Powell would threaten the lower basin states' ability to draw water and power from Lake Mead, which at the time was at 62 percent capacity. Norton also said she wanted the states to engage in another discussion next April.

Nevada officials do not believe another mid-year review is necessary, but they do not object to one being called for in the 2006 plan. "This issue is not a hill to die for," said Ken Albright, director of resources for the Southern Nevada Water Authority. "We really don't think the (midyear review) language is needed, but we're not offended that it's in there."

The Bureau of Reclamation releases 8.23 million acre-feet of water annually from Lake Powell to Lake Mead in a process that officials compare to pouring water from one cup to another. An acre-foot is about 326,000 gallons, or enough to serve one to two average households for one year.

No surplus is available in the current water year, but states are allowed to take more than their normal allocation from the Colorado River when it is available. Surplus water generally must be used to meet domestic demand and cannot be "banked" by the states in reservoirs or underground for use in the future.

Because of that, and because surplus water can be fleeting on the Colorado River, Nevada officials do not treat it as a dependable source. "We don't want to become dependent on that," Albright said.

Instead, water users in Southern Nevada have "embraced the conservation ethic" and cut the region's water use even while the population has continued to grow, Albright said.

The states have until the end of the month to comment on the 2006 Annual Operating Plan before the Bureau of Reclamation submits it to Norton for approval.

Norton is expected to sign off on the final version of the plan before the end of the year.

Review-Journal writer Henry Breaun contributed to this story.

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