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Future of Colorado River subject of meeting

Utah environmental group seeks dismantling of Glen Canyon Dam, proposes pumping reserve water into aquifers

By HENRY BREAN
REVIEW-JOURNAL

The Bureau of Reclamation will hold a public meeting in Henderson today on the future of the Colorado River, and a Utah environmental group plans to be there to call for an end to North America's second largest man-made reservoir.

Moab-based Living Rivers wants the federal government to tear down Glen Canyon Dam and allow Lake Powell to drain downstream, a move the group argues would save water and revitalize the Grand Canyon.

"We've got to do something because it's obvious the Colorado River doesn't have any more to give," said John Weisheit, Living Rivers conservation director.

But state and federal water officials insist the dam and the reservoir behind it are far too important to simply dismantle.

"The groups out there are free to have their own suggestions and their own opinions, but from the bureau's perspective, it is not an issue we have under consideration," said Doug Hendrix, spokesman for Reclamation's Upper Colorado Regional Office. "The intent of the reservoir is to provide long-term carry-over storage for Colorado River water users."

Lake Powell has served that role well in recent years, said Vince Alberta, spokesman for the Southern Nevada Water Authority.

"The value of Lake Powell has never been more significant than over the last six years, when the Colorado River has been dealing with the worst drought on record," Alberta said.

"Without Lake Powell, Lake Mead would have been pretty close to empty before this in-flow year," Hendrix said.

Today's meeting is scheduled for 10 a.m. to noon at the Henderson Convention Center on Water Street. The bureau will hold a second meeting from 10 a.m. to noon Thursday in Salt Lake City.

Reclamation officials are seeking public input as they prepare to consider new management strategies for Lake Mead and Lake Powell, where water levels have dropped in the face of drought and increased demand by water users.

Interior Secretary Gale Norton has called on the Lower Colorado River Basin states of Nevada, Arizona and California and the upper basin states of Colorado, New Mexico, Utah and Wyoming to adopt new management strategies for the lakes.

Norton has also directed the states to agree for the first time on rules for dividing a shortage on the river.

She wants both issues decided by the start of 2007, or the federal government will impose a solution of its own.

About 90 percent of Southern Nevada's drinking water comes from the Colorado River.

In a 24-page report titled "The One-Dam Solution," Living Waters argues that decommissioning Glen Canyon Dam is necessary to restore natural habitat along the Colorado and protect wildlife, recreation and cultural resources within the Grand Canyon.

ON THE WEB:
<http://www.livingrivers.org/pdfs/TheOne-DamSolution.pdf>

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The move also would save water, since about 6 percent the Colorado River's annual flow is lost to evaporation and seepage from Lake Powell, which straddles the Utah-Arizona border at the northeastern end of the Grand Canyon.

Instead of storing water in the giant, open-air reservoir, the Living Rivers report released this week recommends pumping the water into depleted groundwater aquifers along the Colorado River, where it could be stored with comparatively little evaporation.

According to the report, there is enough aquifer space in California and Arizona alone to store almost twice as much water as Lake Powell can hold when it is full.

But Alberta called the Living Rivers plan "cost prohibitive."

"The spike flows on the Colorado River would make it extremely difficult to make an artificial recharge system large enough to accommodate the volume of water over the run-off period," he said. "Lake Powell has risen more than 50 feet over last few weeks alone."

One way or another, Glen Canyon Dam will not last forever, Weisheit said. Unless something is done, silt carried by the river will build up at the base of the dam until it endangers the structure.

"This is going to happen anyway," Weisheit said of losing the dam. "Why are we putting this off?"

The Bureau of Reclamation will accept public input through Aug. 31 on how the Colorado River should be operated during low reservoir conditions.

Comments can be sent by fax to 702-293-8156, by e-mail to strategies@lc.usbr.gov, or by surface mail to Regional Director, Bureau of Reclamation, Lower Colorado Region, Attention: BCOO-1000, P.O. Box 61470, Boulder City, NV 89006-1470.

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