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Released On: June 18, 2007

Reclamation Announces Preferred Alternative for Colorado River Interim Guidelines for Lower Basin Shortages and Coordinated Operations of Lake Powell and Lake Mead

After considering comments received on four potential alternatives for interim guidelines the Secretary of the Interior could use to determine reduced deliveries for U.S. water users in the lower Colorado River Division states and coordinated operations for Lake Powell and Lake Mead, the Bureau of Reclamation has identified the preferred alternative it plans to analyze in its preparation of a Final Environmental Impact Statement and other environmental studies.

The preferred alternative incorporates the key elements of the plan submitted to the Secretary by the seven Colorado River Basin states. In addition, it creates flexibility for the potential storage of additional conserved Colorado River or non-Colorado River water in Lake Mead in the future. This alternative responds to a broad range of public input during the NEPA process, and addresses the interests and comments of water users and other stakeholders in all seven Colorado River Basin states of Arizona, California, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, Utah and Wyoming. The need for additional operational guidelines is clear in light of the ongoing historic drought in the Colorado River Basin. Reclamation has utilized an intensive collaborative effort with a broad range of stakeholders during this NEPA process.

The key elements of the preferred alternative - which would guide operations of Lake Powell and Lake Mead - through 2026 follow:

- * Shortages - that is reduced deliveries to U.S. water users in the Lower Basin - would be tied to Lake Mead's elevation. If Lake Mead's elevation drops, reductions in water deliveries to Lower Basin users would increase, thereby conserving water in the reservoir.
- * The preferred alternative would adopt detailed guidelines to improve coordinated operations of Lake Powell and Lake Mead through the full range of reservoir levels.
- * Credits for Colorado River or non-Colorado River water that has been conserved by users in the Lower Basin (known as "intentionally created surplus") would be made available for release from Lake Mead at a later time. The total amount of

credits would be 2.1 million acre-feet (maf), but this amount could be increased up to 4.2 maf in future years.

* Interim Surplus Guidelines - adopted by the Department in 2001- would be modified and extended to 2026. The revised Interim Surplus Guidelines would address the operation of Lake Mead at relatively full elevations, and would determine when "surplus" water supplies would be available to Lower Basin water users. The description of the preferred alternative is available on Reclamation's Lower Colorado Region web site, at <http://www.usbr.gov/lc/region/programs/strategies/documents.html>.

A thorough analysis of the potential environmental impacts of the preferred alternative will be presented in the Final Environmental Impact Statement, which is currently scheduled for public release by the end of September, 2007.

Given the ongoing historic drought, the Department has repeatedly stressed the need for additional operational guidelines for the management and operation of the Colorado River. The Department anticipates a final decision by the Secretary of the Interior by the end of this year.

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