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Office of the Secretary

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Norton Decides to Maintain Level of Colorado River Water Releases at Lake Powell for Now

WASHINGTON - Secretary of the Interior Gale Norton today announced her decision to maintain Colorado River water releases from Lake Powell at their scheduled level for the next five months because drought conditions in the Colorado River Basin have eased during the 2005 water year.

Norton's decision followed a mid-year review she had included in the 2005 Annual Operating Plan for the Colorado River Reservoirs to determine if levels at Lake Powell and Lake Mead and the runoff forecast for these reservoirs warranted adjusting releases from Lake Powell for the remaining five months of this water year.

While affirming the ability of the Secretary to make adjustments to releases from Lake Powell as part of annual operations, Norton determined that an adjustment was not warranted at this time.

The National Weather Service's April 15, 2005 forecast indicates that the most probable April-July snowmelt runoff will be 106 percent of average. With this runoff, Lake Powell is projected to be at 48 percent of capacity (about 10.9 million acre feet) and Lake Mead at 57.5 percent of capacity (about 13.0 million acre feet) on Sept. 30, 2005. If "average" runoff persists through next year, these reservoirs are projected to have nearly identical contents by Sept. 30, 2006.

The Secretary's decision means that by Sept. 30 - the end of the 2005 water year -- about 8.23 million acre feet of water will have been released from Glen Canyon Dam.

Norton emphasized that it was premature to conclude from the 2005 water year that the drought in the Colorado River Basin has ended. "We remain concerned about drought in the basin and therefore will propose a mid-year review in the 2006 Colorado River Annual Operating Plan if conditions warrant," Norton said. "We need to continue close monitoring of reservoir levels and releases in the 2006 water year."

The Secretary made her decision after detailed consultations with the Colorado River Management Work Group, which represents the seven Basin State governors, federal

agencies, academic and scientific communities, environmental groups, the recreation industry, hydropower contractors, and the public.

Norton noted that she had urged the Basin States to develop a consensus plan on managing the river during drought, including reservoir levels and releases from Lake Powell. However, the states were unable to reach agreement. The Secretary notified the state governors of her decision earlier today through an official Letter of Transmittal.

Because of the need to improve coordinated management of the Colorado River reservoirs due to the current and future droughts, Norton informed the governors that Interior will convene a meeting of the Colorado River Management Work Group by May 31, 2005, to determine the most appropriate way to address issues in the Colorado River Basin.

"At a minimum, these consultations should address the development of guidelines for Lower Basin shortages and conjunctive management of Lake Powell and Lake Mead," Norton said. "It is my expectation that the Department will complete these processes by December 2007."

"We do not underestimate the challenges facing us in this effort," Norton said. "The importance of the Colorado River to the Southwest for water supply, hydropower production, fish and wildlife, recreation and other benefits dictates that all parties work together to find creative solutions that will conserve reservoir storage and help to minimize the adverse effects of drought in the basin."

Under a 1922 compact, Colorado River water is divided between the Upper Basin States -- Colorado, Wyoming, Utah and New Mexico -- and the Lower Basin States -- California, Nevada and Arizona.

Lake Powell, one of two major reservoirs for the system, releases water for the Lower Basin States and to help fulfill U.S. treaty obligations to Mexico. Water released from Lake Powell, which is on the Arizona-Utah border, is stored at Lake Mead on the Arizona-Nevada border for delivery to the Lower Basin States and Mexico.

Detailed information on current hydrologic conditions and anticipated spring snowmelt runoff are online at <http://www.usbr.gov/lc/region/g4000/AOP2005/midyearpp.pdf>.

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