



Meetings to focus on Colorado River water pact

Comments will lead to seven-state sharing agreement

By Jerd Smith, Rocky Mountain News
June 16, 2005

Federal water officials, hoping to break a seven-state impasse over a new drought plan for the Colorado River, will launch the first round of public meetings in Utah and Nevada next month on what such a plan should contain.

Late last year, federal officials warned the states that if they couldn't agree on a drought plan, the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation would do it for them.

"The drought has placed a lot of pressure on everybody," Bob Johnson, director of the Lower Colorado Region at the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, said Wednesday. "Now decisions have to be made."

U.S. Interior Secretary Gale Norton has said she wants the water-sharing agreement finished by the end of 2007.

In April, the seven states that comprise the Colorado River Basin missed the deadline to come up with their own plan.

Today the stalemate continues as states from Wyoming to California contemplate a future of shrinking water supplies.

"Now it's who blinks first," said Herb Guenther, director of Arizona's department of water resources.

Tensions rose in May when Norton refused to hold more water in Lake Powell this year, as Colorado and others had requested.

Any new drought plan is likely to include triggers for determining when releases from Lake Powell to Lake Mead, the river's two main storage banks, can be reduced.

But that's something Arizona and other states have vigorously opposed because it means they would have to get by on less water.

Under the 1922 Colorado River Compact, the river's water is divided between the Upper Basin states - Colorado, Wyoming, Utah and New Mexico - and the three Lower Basin states - Nevada, Arizona and California.

Lake Powell holds extra water generated in the Upper Basin until it is needed farther downstream in Lake Mead. But if Lake Powell drops too low, Upper Basin states such as Colorado could be forced to cut back their own take from the river to ensure those farther south get their legal share. The river provides about half the water used on the Front Range.

In the past, there always has been enough extra water to satisfy growing demands on the river. But the recent drought has shown all of the states how difficult it is to manage when the river's supplies are short.

Water officials estimate that the Upper Basin states did without more than 400,000 acre-feet of Colorado River water - enough for more than 800,000 households - during the dry spell that began in 2000.

Even if the drought ends and there is a return to wetter weather, the need to provide drinking water to millions of new residents throughout the West will strain the river to the breaking point, water officials say.

The main problem: Writers of the 1922 compact believed the river produced, on average, nearly 17 million acre-feet of water, more than enough to supply the Upper Basin and Lower Basin with 7.5 million acre-feet each.

Now, water officials believe the river produces much less - from 13 million acre-feet to 14.5 million acre-feet.

"The river has been overdeveloped based on the water supply we now know is there," said Scott Balcomb, Colorado's representative on the Upper Colorado River Commission and a negotiator in the seven-state talks.

Last week, at a University of Colorado conference on the river, several Western water officials said the only way to break the deadlock is to find new water supplies, using such techniques as cloud seeding to produce more snow or desalination plants on the West Coast.

How to comment

Public hearings on the Colorado River Drought Plan:

- **July 26:** Henderson, Nev., 10 a.m to noon (PDT), Henderson Convention Center, 200 S. Water St.
- **July 28:** Salt Lake City, 10 a.m. to noon, Hilton Hotel, 255 South West Temple St.
- **Officials will take** written comments through Aug. 31 for the Lower Colorado region at Strategies@lc.usbr.gov, or by fax at 702-293-8156.
- **For the Upper Colorado region**, the e-mail address is Strategies@uc.usbr.gov, or fax 801-524-3858.