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Upper Colorado River basin residents weigh in on drought plan

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By MARK THIESSEN | Associated Press
July 28, 2005

SALT LAKE CITY - A Utah environmental group on Thursday renewed its call for Glen Canyon Dam to be decommissioned and Lake Powell drained to stop the massive yearly evaporation of stored Colorado River water, saying there is a better use for it in the water-starved West.

"We believe 800,000 feet of water could be available to the lower basin," said John Weisheit, with the Moab-based Living Rivers group. "We think that is a significant amount of water."

The group issued a 24-page report _ titled "The One-Dam Solution" _ this week ahead of two federal Bureau of Reclamation meetings seeking comment on plans to manage Lake Powell and Lake Mead during drought.

By having only Hoover Dam in Nevada capture water and using extensive underground storage, enough water could be saved to support 1.6 million households of four people each, Weisheit said at Thursday's meeting here.

When Weisheit spoke at a similar meeting Tuesday in Henderson, Nev., he was told the bureau has been directed by Congress not to study that.

"Living Rivers thinks it's highly undemocratic that we are not allowed to discuss and debate the study of the facility that uses public money," Weisheit said Thursday. "If Glen Canyon Dam is needed, the studies will prove that. If it is not, then that will be the case, too, and we should let science decide what is best for the resources of the Colorado River."

There was no debate Thursday as water managers only took testimony for review. More hearings may be held before the bureau's management report is issued in December 2007.

This week's meetings were part of Interior Secretary Gale Norton's command to establish rules to limit fights among states while managing the river during shortages. A 1922 agreement allocating Colorado River water does not specify how it should be shared during drought.

Norton in May rejected a request by four states in the river's upper basin _ Colorado, Utah, Wyoming and New Mexico _ to reduce releases of water from drought-depleted Lake Powell to more quickly refill the reservoir.

The decision was seen as a victory for California, Nevada and Arizona _ three lower basin states that rely on allocations from the downstream Lake Mead reservoir. But Norton made it clear she wanted the states to find a way to share the water without federal involvement.

Some of those who testified Thursday urged the government not to ignore the financial rewards from recreation and tourism at both lakes and nearby recreational areas.

Fourteen million visitors annually result in direct and indirect economic benefit to the economy, said Kitty Roberts, superintendent for the Glen Canyon National Recreation Area.

But five years of drought have "negatively affected recreation use and likely caused significant changes to the local and regional economies," she said.



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The National Park Service has spent more than \$20 million over the past three years responding to the drought, with the money being used for things like closing or extending launch ramps, moving or adjusting docks.

She urged bureau officials to establish critical water levels on both lakes so recreational services won't have to be curtailed.

Steve Ward, president of Friends of Lake Powell, asked the bureau to consider adjusting water depending on conditions to stabilize the lake's level.

"More efficient reservoir operation would help prevent overflowing spills in the wet years and slow the drawdowns during severe droughts that can jeopardize hydroelectric power production," he said.

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On the Net:

Bureau of Reclamation: <http://www.usbr.gov/>

Living Rivers: <http://www.livingrivers.net/>

Glen Canyon National Recreation Area: <http://www.nps.gov/glca/>

Lake Mead National Recreation Area: <http://www.nps.gov/lame/>

Hoover Dam: <http://www.nps.gov/lame/>

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