Colorado River must go with a better flow

By TICK SEGERBLOM SPECIAL TO THE REVIEW-JOURNAL

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I grew up with the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, the architect of the Colorado River's network of dams and reservoirs that now plumbs societies of 35 million people across the Southwest. My birthplace was the town that built Hoover Dam, Reclamation's icon and longtime model for water engineers worldwide. Lake Mead, the nation's largest reservoir, was my backyard, water skiing a cherished pastime. Reclamation's handiwork was something to behold, but when I visit there now, I'm not so sure.

Peering into Lake Mead's record-low water levels while hearing the constant chatter of shortages and interstate water battles to come, I'm reminded of Reclamation's December 2012 presentation at Caesars Palace. Despite numerous scientific studies estimating the impacts of climate change on Colorado River flows — some warning of potential stream flow reductions of up to 40 percent — Reclamation announced after its three years of analysis that while shortages of up to 10 percent may materialize, 37 years would pass before such reductions settled in.

Certainly no one knows exactly what the future holds, but should we not be hoping for the best while planning for the worst? Shouldn't the public at least be given the facts and presented the scenarios of what could happen, not just an optimistic view?

Over the past 14 years, Colorado River flows have averaged 15 percent below normal. What if this, or something worse, is indeed the new normal? If the current trend continues for another few years, what does that say about the usefulness of Reclamation's modeling?

The world's 12th largest economy, valued at $1.7 trillion annually, relies on this planning. Now 20 months since the Caesars presentation, one only need to visit Lake Mead or peruse the headlines to know the Colorado River water system is in trouble, and we're a long way from 2060.

And what of the critical interplay between surface water shortages and ground water use, and the increasingly rapid depletion of ground water supplies across the Colorado River Basin. Reclamation is not discussing this at all, yet recent satellite analysis of the basin reveals that we're currently mining groundwater at a rate of one Lake Mead every six years.

Also being ignored is the opposite end of the hydrologic spectrum. Floods may be far from people's minds as the current drought moves through its 15th year, but no scientist predicts Colorado River floods are a thing of the past. Findings published last month by the American Geophysical Union, and known to Reclamation for several years, present new evidence of Colorado River flood flows, at rates and frequencies much greater than what Reclamation has been using in its designs and operations.

During a relatively minor flood in 1983, we almost lost Glen Canyon Dam, the nation's fourth tallest, holding back more than 1½ years of the annual flow of the Colorado River. Its emergency discharge tunnels collapsed, operating at only 20 percent capacity. What happens when a real flood arrives — the 100-year event or greater of the scale scientists now advise us to prepare for, and the Colorado River infrastructure has never experienced?

I must admit, I'm not fond of Glen Canyon Dam. In my youth, family vacations involved floating long stretches of the Colorado River. Often it was the Grand Canyon, but we also paddled the 185 miles of meanders now submerged under Lake Powell behind Glen Canyon Dam. Those trips taught me that there was a bit more to a river than the water and hydroelectric power it can provide. Like us, rivers live and rivers breathe. But because of us, rivers also need tending to. My late father's paintings created during those journeys are a constant reminder of this.

Someone should remind Reclamation that we don't exist independently of ecology. We are part of it, yet Reclamation's planning ignores this. This is a river of national parks, after all, and a river that no longer meets the sea. The Grand Canyon's river corridor is a sterile, regulated stream when compared with the vibrant ecosystem I experienced prior to the completion of Glen Canyon Dam upstream.

I have no idea of the scale of ecological health the Colorado River could sustain while continuing to meet our water requirements, but I'm certain we're never going to find out under Reclamation's guidance. Of more urgency now, however, is that we are being left in the dark about the true level of risk the Southwest faces of either too little or too much water. We need to know the real threats of scarcity, to public safety and to ecological decline on the Colorado River. We need — the Colorado River needs —an independent, scientific and economic audit of Reclamation's Colorado River management plans and strategies.

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