



Randy Wyrick
rwyrick@vaildaily.com

January 20, 2016

Critics skeptical of National Park Service's Glen Canyon Dam plan



A National Park Service and Bureau of Reclamation plan to change the timing of high-volume water releases through Glen Canyon Dam does nothing to address dwindling Colorado River flows, says a Colorado-based conservation organization.



Glen Canyon Dam backs up the water that creates Lake Powell.

Where to comment

You have until April 7 to comment. Go to <http://parkplanning.nps.gov/LTEMPEIS>.

For more information about the draft EIS, visit <http://ltempeis.anl.gov>.

WASHINGTON — The feds say if they alter the amount and timing of Colorado River water flowing through Glen Canyon Dam, they can keep providing water and electricity to millions, while preserving Grand Canyon National Park and other treasures.

Those feds may as well be wishing upon a star, says Gary Wockner, executive director of Save the Colorado, based in Fort Collins.

During the past 15 years, the amount of water in the Colorado River has steadily declined, Wockner said, and all the science indicates that flows will continue to decrease.

“I am extremely skeptical that the federal government will be able to bail the system out, unless El Nino saves it,” Wockner said.

Lesson in liquidity

In the West, whiskey's for drinking, but water's for fighting over.

Here's a quick primer.

Glen Canyon Dam was constructed to capture water and flood canyons in Utah and Arizona to create Lake Powell, providing electricity and irrigation water. Water from Lake Powell runs downriver to fill Lake Meade, a reservoir near Las Vegas. If Lake Meade doesn't have enough water — and it hasn't for years because of dwindling river flows and increasing demands — water to fill it is drained from Lake Powell through Glen Canyon Dam.

That water starts in the Colorado River's headwaters in the Central Rockies resort region.

High water plan

The National Park Service and the Bureau of Reclamation created seven possible alternatives for managing the Colorado River at Glen Canyon Dam. Their favorite is designed to mimic the Colorado River's natural flooding through the Glen and Grand canyons that occurred before the Glen Canyon Dam was constructed.

The Park Service says those high volume water releases through Glen Canyon Dam will pick up sand stored in the river channel, and redeposit it downstream as sandbars and beaches. These sand features and associated backwater habitats can provide key fish and wildlife habitat, restore riparian vegetation and enhance wilderness values along the Colorado River in Glen Canyon National Recreation Area and Grand Canyon National Park.

The Glen Canyon Dam plan is based on the latest available science, said Deputy Secretary of the Interior Michael L. Connor.

That science is hardly settled, Wockner said.

“There’s a certain amount of water they have to send downstream. In all the alternatives, that amount doesn’t change,” Wockner said. “The entire (environmental impact statement) depends on enough water coming out of Colorado, and other upper basin states.”

Despite how the feds manage it, there’s not enough water in the Colorado River to continue business as usual and river levels are dwindling, Wockner said.

“They need to dramatically change how the Colorado River is managed,” Wockner said. “There’s not enough water to run the system the way it has been run for the last 15 years. We’re going to have to have to consequential change.”

El Nino won’t save it

Even if this winter’s wetter weather pours 5 million acre feet of water on the West Coast, it will only hold them over for 18 to 24 months, Wockner said. (An acre foot is an area roughly the size of a football field a foot deep.) The Colorado River was approaching that crisis point when last May’s miracle rains across parts of the Rocky Mountain West saved it.

The Department of the Interior is buying water from upper basin farmers — mostly in Colorado — to send it down river. The pilot program last year only provided a couple thousand acre feet of water.

The federal government could buy more, but water is expensive. If the weather doesn’t change, it would cost a couple hundred million dollars a year to buy enough water to keep the turbines spinning in Glen Canyon Dam, Wockner said.

The National Park Service and Bureau of Reclamation began developing the draft environmental impact statement for this framework in 2011. The Park Service says the plan is based on 20 years of science and will guide decisions for the next 20 years.

“Public participation is key to fulfilling our stewardship responsibilities as envisioned under the Grand Canyon Protection Act,” said National Park Service Director Jonathan B. Jarvis.

Staff Writer Randy Wyrick can be reached at 970-748-2935 and rwyrick@vaildaily.com.

Top Video Headlines

of 3



©2016 - 2016 Swift Communications, Inc.