

Drought contingency plans discussed

By Blake Herzog, @BlakeHerzog | Posted: Wednesday, May 18, 2016 5:42 pm

About 20 Yumans gathered at the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation's Yuma Area Office to get a glimpse of efforts to keep more water in the Colorado River system to compensate for drought and reduce the chances of a calamitous drop in the water level of Lake Mead.

Officials from the Arizona Department of Water Resources, Central Arizona Project, and the BOR gave an overview of how the dry spell that began in 2000 has decimated the lake, which is the main storage center for water that's used by Arizona, California and Nevada, known as the river's "lower basin" states.

Sixteen years ago the lake was at 94 percent capacity, said Clint Wyatt, an ADWR hydrologist, while today it's at 37 percent.

About a year ago there was concern about a shortage being declared for this year on the river, noted Lisa Atkins, president of the Central Arizona Project board, but planning and luck conspired to keep Arizona out of that position.

"As you know all too well, we avoided shortage in 2016 due to our efforts to conserve water in Lake Mead, and a fortuitous boost from Mother Nature in what we fondly refer to as 'Miracle May,'" she said.

Lake Mead is normally fed by Lake Powell further east on the river, but that lake has only been able to send one major "equalizing" release since the drought began, which is why Lake Mead has been drawn so far down.

The BOR is currently projecting there will be no shortage during this year, as the reservoir clings to that crucial 1,075-foot level aside from potential dips below it during the summer.

But by the end of 2017 things get a lot more dicey, with a better than 50 percent chance of a shortage being declared for 2018, getting to around 65 percent by 2021 according to federal projections, said Dan Bunk, manager of the River Operations Group for the Lower Colorado Region of the BOR.

Negotiations are currently underway between the three states on a "drought contingency proposal," which would contain voluntary water delivery reductions from all three in an effort to keep Lake Mead at the 1,075-foot level needed to avoid declaration of a shortage across the region, or at least from going too far below that point.

As it goes down below 1,075 feet, Lake Mead loses water more quickly as its surface approaches the V-

shaped floor. The drought contingency proposal is designed to keep the situation from deteriorating beyond that point, where shortages would be more drastic and affect more users. At 1,025 feet the federal secretary of the interior would have authority to step in and make unilateral cuts in water delivery.

Up until that point, rights are controlled by the “law of the river,” the cumulative agreements and decisions that have been made over the course of more than a century on how to divvy up the Colorado. Using an extraordinarily wet year as the base for it has led to an overallocation of Lake Mead’s water among the competing interests.

Yuma County has some of the most “senior,” or protected, water rights within Arizona, but Arizona is the “junior” state among the Lower Basin, which means it’s required to take reductions before Nevada, which doesn’t use as much water. California currently isn’t required to accept any reductions in Colorado River allocations, but it could underneath the drought contingency proposal.

Wyatt said California users have various reasons for being willing to accept cuts for the first time, but “the one thing that unites them is a loathing of uncertainty, and just as we desire to wring every bit of certainty out of the system, they are similarly uncomfortable with the possibility that we could reach such critical levels that the secretary may declare some sort of unilateral action.”

The drought contingency proposal would be in addition to a series of “interim guidelines” set in 2007 on how Colorado River shortages would be distributed among Arizona and Nevada. It further drills down how it hits Arizona user categories, with most of the initial burden falling on agricultural users, then urban users in the CAP, which channels water to the Phoenix and Tucson areas.

An additional agreement with Mexico followed the 2007 deal, and its contributions have resulted in up to three feet of Lake Mead’s current water level, officials said.

Ted Cooke, general manager of the CAP, said negotiations are going on among Arizona interests to determine what the voluntary cuts under the contingency plan will be, and whether the CAP will again take on most of the reductions, as it does under the 2007 agreements.

“There is an open question as to how these additional cuts in the drought contingency plan would be done. Will they be done in the same way? Will they be done in some different way?” he said, adding, “There needs to be a pretty intense intrastate discussion to answer those specific questions.”

There’s no fixed timeline for the drought contingency proposal to become an actual plan, but work is expected to continue at least through the fall. Any agreement that comes out of the drought contingency proposal would have to go to the Arizona Legislature for approval.

Yuma attorney Wade Noble, who represents several water districts with senior water rights to the

Colorado, said earlier this week he and others representing local interests are “at the table” for negotiations on the drought contingency proposal.

“We probably aren’t going to get too involved with making sure other water users can continue to sustain whatever it is they’re doing beyond their water budget, or be able to use our supply to sustain whatever it is they do,” he said.

In the meantime, the state is storing up to 3.4 million acre feet of water in the Arizona Water Banking Authority’s underground aquifers, unused Colorado River water stashed away for a drought over the last 20 years. Other efforts to preserve Lake Mead include an agreement among Lower Basin users to conserve water and leave it in the lake, with a goal of about 600,000 acre feet by the end of next year.

This was the second annual such workshop sponsored by ADWR and CAP in Phoenix, and the first to be webcast to Yuma after Paul Muthart, general manager of Pasquinelli Produce, made the suggestion to the ADWR. Webcasts to CAP offices in Phoenix and Tucson were already planned.

He said it saved those 20 people from driving up to Phoenix for a 90-minute meeting. “You always have to go and you always have to listen, because you never know when that nugget of information is going to pop up,” he said. “I wasn’t taken aback by anything I heard today, but nonetheless it’s important to participate and be there with everyone else, open to the possibilities of learning something.”