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INSIGHTS, WATER

Drought Drains Lake Mead to Lowest Level as Nevada Senator Calls for Government Audit

Gary Wockner | July 9, 2014 9:59 am | Comments



As the largest reservoir in the U.S. falls to its [lowest water level in history](#), Nevada State Sen. [Tick Segerblom](#) introduced a bill title and issued a [press release](#) on July 8 calling for an “independent scientific and economic audit of the Bureau of Reclamation’s strategies for [Colorado River](#) management.”

Sen. Segerblom’s position represents the growing political impatience with the current management system for the river. He takes hard aim at the Bureau of Reclamation as being responsible for these problems as he says, “Reclamation may have played a major role in erecting our Colorado River infrastructure, but it’s clearly time for people across the basin to begin leading its future management.”



Whether you agree or disagree with Sen. Segerblom's approach, something needs to change to address the water supply threats, and something must change as soon as possible to arrest the continual decline of the health of the Colorado River.

Further, the Senator calls for a more environmentally minded management focus on the health of the river as stated in his press release: "Healthy rivers signal healthy societies, yet Reclamation failed to mention ecological issues in its recent analysis. The Colorado River is a river of national parks, but the river running through them is struggling."

This week's history-making, bad-news event at Lake Mead has already triggered lots of news stories, but almost all of these stories focus on the water supply for Las Vegas, Phoenix and California. But what about the health of the river itself? Senator Segerblom's press release reminds us that this river is more than just water supply for cities and farms—it's a living entity full of species that depend on the river for survival, and as the lake level falls, the first entity to feel even more pain won't be Las Vegas or Phoenix but rather the river itself.

Let's take a look at the environmental problems with the Colorado River and how they are getting worse. Grab a cup of coffee because this is a buzzkill:

- Four federally listed **endangered fish** continue to struggle to survive in the Colorado River, but managers' answer to this problem is to continually spawn and restock the fish, not to address the underlying problem of too many dams and diversions.
- Many of the tributaries flowing into the Colorado River are severely depleted, and some, like the Gila River in Arizona, are **completely drained dry** almost every year.
- The ecological health of the Grand Canyon is **severely degraded and imperiled**—what was once a wild and brown frothy foment of a river filled with native fish, canyon-carving sediment and warm-water organisms is now a cold, clear-green, somewhat sterile and completely controlled dam/drainage system that has not been adequately mitigated or fixed.
- **Climate change models** indicate the decrease in flow in the Colorado River could be significantly more than **Bureau of Reclamation is planning** for, yet managers have not even grappled with the last 15 years of drought let alone what

[climate change](#) may increasingly offer.

- As river flows drop, as lake levels drop, and as climate change models indicate worsening conditions, cities and water districts in Colorado, Wyoming, Utah, New Mexico and Arizona are proposing [even more dams and diversions](#) out of the Colorado River system. All the states and the cities are trying to get the last legally allowed drop of water out of the river before someone else does.
- [Almost 1/12](#) of the entire flow of the Colorado River simply evaporates into thin air or seeps away into the ground surrounding all of the reservoirs, yet the river's managers are not considering ways to mitigate or fix this loss to water supplies as well as to river health from the 50 to 100-year old dam and reservoir system.

To address these problems as well as water supply threats, the Bureau of Reclamation spent years creating the [Colorado River Basin Study](#) and released it publicly in 2012 with much fanfare. Since that time, Reclamation has appointed several "Working Groups" to further study the problem and offer solutions—including a "Healthy Flows Working Group"—but over a year has passed without public communication about recommendations or solutions.

To be fair, it's not completely all bad news—there are a few glimmers of hope around the Colorado River basin too. The effort by the Bureau to [restore the Colorado River Delta](#) has been positive, environmental groups' work to stop and stall [new water projects](#) has made a difference, and a few cities' new pilot project, [Colorado River System Conservation Program](#), offers a potential path forward.

But despite these glimmers of hope, there's one overwhelming fact in the Colorado River ecosystem and it's painted bright white with the increasing size of the bathtub ring across the walls of Lake Mead—we are draining more water out of the system than the river is putting in.

Whether you agree or disagree with Sen. Segerblom's approach, something needs to change to address the water supply threats, and something must change as soon as possible to arrest the continual decline of the health of the Colorado River. The system, and the health of the river itself, cannot be sustained the way it's currently operated.

Gary Wockner, PhD, coordinates the [Save The Colorado River Campaign](#) whose mission is to protect and restore the Colorado River and its tributaries from the source to the sea. Gary@SaveTheColorado.org.

Comments

7 Comments

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[hljmesa](#) · 9 days ago

Cover CAP in AZ with solar panels...India is already doing this !

5 ^ | ▾ · Reply · Share ▾



[agelbert](#) · 8 days ago

One twelfth evaporating is a LOT of water. Do you realize how much solar energy is going to waste in that process? **Our society has gotten really blind at obvious solutions.** What I mean is that IF you put SHADE over the reservoirs in the form of FLOATING SOLAR PANEL structures (*the Japanese are putting them on the ocean surface, a far more corrosive environment, so a lake is not a problem!*), you RADICALLY reduce the evaporation AND get a bunch of energy at the same time! More WATER and more ENERGY! What's not to like?

Yeah, I know, that's WAY too obvious! LOL! We used to do "obvious" in the USA. What happened? Sure some hester will complain that

Yeah, I know, that's WAY too obvious. LOL. We used to do "obvious" in the USA. What happened? Sure some boater will complain that he doesn't want to navigate around solar panels. So what!?

People, we need to come together and win the Climate Victory or we will be very miserable or very dead!

Demand an END to DIRTY ENERGY NOW!

"Approximately 13 percent of the U.S. electricity supply was powered by renewables as of the end of 2013, roughly half of Germany's rate."

<http://thinkprogress.org/clima...>

The USA, a historic leader in new technology, is getting left behind because of the profit-over-planet biosphere degrading fossil fuel industry that buys our politicians with the profits from pollution producing fuels while said

[see more](#)

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



nick quinlan → agelbert · 5 days ago

IF only the subsidies for oil and nuclear had gone to renewables all these years, as it should have, we wouldn't be in this predicament today.

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



agelbert → nick quinlan · 5 days ago

Yep. and remember it's going to cost over one Trillion dollars (with a T - year 2000 estimated costs. It's probably a LOT more now.) to decommission our four hundred plus nuclear radioactive white elephants. All those "fine folks" that collected dividends on those "safe" reactors need to PAY for that but you KNOW they want to stick we-the-people with that bill too. Don't let them get away with it. The potter's barn rule is for the nukers and the fossil fuel profit over planet greed balls too!

[img] <http://www.pic4ever.com/images...> [/img]



^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Thomas Martin · 9 days ago

1. The damn dam shouldn't have been built. 2. Check on Cliven Bundy, I think he has the missing water. 3. There is less water coming down the Colorado, and 4. Yes, there needs to be an audit which includes scientific reasons for the mess we have created for trying to control nature.

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Vicki bresnahan → Thomas Martin · 7 days ago

Too much water being used in Vegas for water features and hotels and aquariums

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



CL · 9 days ago

It's about time!

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