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Sarah Stock Guest Columnist



The world of Colorado River management is in flux.

This year, all seven basin states are scrambling to keep up with the real possibility of ongoing drought and shrinking reservoirs. We all hope for some alleviation of sweltering summer temperatures and bad snow seasons, but we're going to have to do more than hope to stop the head-in-the-sand approach to climate change.

The hydrology of the Colorado River these past few years has been so far below normal that the models used in 2007 to get the first round of drought contingency plans (DCPs) on the Colorado River are not useful today. Those models sampled the last 100 years to make predictions about future reservoir levels and were used to set modest targets for reducing water use in the Lower Basin states of California,

Arizona and Nevada. The agreements also tied the operations of Lake Mead and Lake Powell together. Simply put, if Lake Mead decreases in elevation, Lake Powell releases more to keep the reservoirs "balanced."

The Upper Basin states of Utah, Colorado, New Mexico and Wyoming are basically obligated to deliver 8.25 million acre-feet of water each year, but have actually released 9 million acre-feet to prop up Lake Mead levels. The need for these extra releases is due to what folks call a "structural deficit."

What have the 2007 DCPs meant for reservoir levels? Basically, rather than Lake Mead dropping below the point where it can generate power and pump water to Las Vegas, the water level has been boosted with releases from Lake Powell. In effect, both reservoirs diminish together more slowly. This was meant as a temporary fix to get us through the tough times, but with the new reality that comes with climate change, this temporary fix won't work for much longer.

Currently, negotiations for new DCPs in both the Upper and Lower Basin are being drafted. The Lower Basin plan should address some of the "structural deficit," but at a cost to some current water users in all three states.

The Upper Basin Drought Contingency Plan does three things: establishes a method for "banking" conserved water each year; cloud seeding (not a conspiracy theory); and last but not least, joint operations of the Colorado River Storage Project reservoirs (CRSP).

The water-banking scenario works with what water wonks call “demand management,” and there is a big debate about how that will play out. In the dream-world scenario, farmers fallow fields, temporarily — with compensation — and the water will flow down to Lake Powell without being used by anyone else and will be saved for a year when there is a shortage of water. The catch is that it will take years to develop a system of shepherding, accounting and paying for the saved water.

The joint operations of the CRSP reservoirs is what will carry the bulk of importance in the next few years. The new DCP outlines a system where Flaming Gorge Reservoir, Navajo Reservoir and the Aspinall Unit in Colorado can all be used to prop up Lake Powell water levels, which in turn prop up Lake Mead water levels.

Once again, this is not a permanent fix. We might have a few years operating under this scenario, but that’s all the Upper Colorado River Commission is banking on. These drought agreements will lapse in 2026 (if they make it that far). Then new ones will have to be established.

In the meantime Utah is still busy developing the Lake Powell Pipeline and Colorado has multiple new proposed diversions to the eastern front. We’re kicking the can down the road, and as we do so, we lose the chance to embark in smart planning and pursue water sustainability in the arid West. We lose the chance make these decisions as a community.

Do we want to decimate all agriculture in exchange for explosive urban growth? Can we imagine new laws allowing and compensating tribes for using their water rights in rivers and for the ecosystem, or will we see that same water used for tar sands extraction and coal-fired power plants? We’re living with climate change now, let’s actually engage on these issues to figure out the best way to do it.

Sarah Stock grew up on the muddy banks of the Colorado River. When she’s not advocating for clean water, and a just transition away from fossil fuels, she’s hiking the canyons of the Colorado Plateau and growing food.