

Drain Lake Powell and tear down Glen Canyon Dam to promote conservation and water supply security

By [Daniel P. Beard](#) and [Gary Wockner](#) | Guest Commentary

September 17, 2018 at 3:10 pm



Justin Sullivan, Getty Images

A bleached “bathtub ring” is visible on the rocky banks of Lake Powell in Utah in this 2015 file photo.

Two days ago [a Denver Post front page story](#) warned of water shortages and climate change facing the Colorado River which supplies water to much of Colorado and its 5.6 million residents. Other national stories the past few weeks have focused on the “crisis” and drought facing the Colorado River due

to climate change.

We appreciate the attention paid to water issues, but there's more to these stories than often gets reported. Addressing water shortages and river-protection problems calls for bold steps based on science and common sense.

Although the population of Colorado and other Colorado River basin states has increased, water use is declining. This "de-coupling" of population and water use has occurred because water conservation programs are working and water use is down. As just one example, Denver's population has increased by over forty percent the last two decades, but its water has gone down by over 15 percent.

For nearly two decades, water supplies in the Colorado River basin have been declining because there is less water. Climate change scientists agree that a majority of the decrease in river flows is due to the effects of global warming, and the same scientists using the same models predict that the amount of water flowing in the Colorado River and its tributaries will decrease even more as climate change intensifies.

What should we do to address this potential water supply deficit?

Our water managers and elected leaders at all levels blindly cling to the past. They choose to ignore this science and the fact that conservation programs are working by pursuing a two-pronged approach.

First, they think pouring more concrete and building more storage structures will result in more water. Second, adding insult to injury, they are paying lip-service to water conservation efforts that have already demonstrated they are working.

Building more dams, reservoirs, and diversions won't address the looming shortages. There is no new water to fill these facilities and there won't be because of the inevitable impacts of climate change.

Even more absurd, our water leaders have become obsessed with the dwindling water level in Lake Powell in Arizona which serves as a water storage facility for the states of Colorado, Utah, and Wyoming. This reservoir — created by Glen Canyon Dam — was conceived and built back in the 1940s and 1950s when the law, science, and flow of water in the Colorado River was radically different. Seventy-five years ago, there were no American environmental laws to protect the Colorado River, the science of climate change did not yet exist, and the flow of water in the Colorado River was much higher.

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Despite those changes, water managers and elected leaders at every level refuse to change. Instead of abandoning the seventy-year-old technology of Glen Canyon Dam, they are trying to beg, borrow, and tax (steal?) enough money and water to keep Lake Powell alive.

In fact, they are proposing a so-called “Drought Contingency Plan” which relies on cloud-seeding to try and make more water, buying and drying-up hundreds of thousands of acres of farms in Colorado to send more water to Lake Powell, and draining other reservoirs in Colorado, including Blue Mesa near Gunnison, down into Lake Powell.

Instead of ignoring science and programs that work, we should chart a new course.

We propose taking three bold actions:

- Double-down on water conservation everywhere, which is fast, cheap, and easy, and won't result in an environmental group suing to stop cities that are trying to build new river-destroying dams and diversions.
- Stop all the new proposed dams and diversions in the Colorado River

basin. As the old saying goes, “when you’re in a hole, stop digging”

- Finally, we should recognize that Lake Powell is no longer needed. The lake should be drained and the water sent downstream to fill

Lake Mead behind Hoover Dam which is now less than 40 percent full. In addition, we should permanently remove Glen Canyon Dam and restore both Glen Canyon and the Grand Canyon in so doing.

Following these steps based on science and common sense make more sense than allowing our water managers and elected leaders to perpetuate inevitable water shortages.

Daniel P. Beard is the former Commissioner of the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation and is author of Deadbeat Dams: Why We Need to Abolish the Bureau of Reclamation and Tear Down Glen Canyon Dam. Gary Wockner is director of Save The Colorado is author of River Warrior: Fighting To Protect The World’s Rivers.

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