A Think Tank for the Colorado River's Future

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Grand Canyon photo by Brian Richter

Have you ever been in a work meeting or a classroom when you realize that you – and probably everyone else in the room – seemed to be talking at cross purposes and had lost track of the problem you were trying to

solve?

That's how many of the water experts, local communities, and conservationists focused on the water woes of the Colorado River have come to feel in recent years. There are many plans being put forth that suggest growing needs for water consumption; each of the states within the river basin have designs for more growth, particularly in cities, industries, and for energy development, and many of those plans are clearly in conflict with each other.

And to many experts in the basin, those plans appear wildly inconsistent with the hydrologic realities: the river is already being fully consumed before reaching its delta in Mexico, and in the midst of a severe and persistent drought both reservoir and aquifer levels are dropping at unprecedented rates. The heavy over-extraction of water from the Colorado and its tributaries has had a devastating impact on the natural ecosystems and species found there. Climate scientists caution that the present drought may very well be the bellwether of a "new normal" expected in coming decades, meaning that the river of the future will have even less to give.

There is clearly an urgent need for a new game plan for the Colorado River, one that is non-partisan, comprehensive, balanced, and built on a realistic foundation.

That's why many of us were quite heartened to see the recent emergence of the Colorado River Research Group, a think tank of sorts comprised of ten of the most knowledgeable experts on the science, law, and water policies of the basin.

One of their first communiqués, released in December, is a set of "Guiding Principles" for water planning. Those principles emphasize the importance of water conservation and re-allocation rather than increased consumption, and they stress the need for a holistic, integrated, basin-wide perspective as contrasted with a *status quo* in which every company, city and state plans in isolation.

This week I had the opportunity to speak with Doug Kenney of the University of Colorado, who chairs the CRRG, about the purpose and aspirations of the group.

What motivated the CRRG to compile this set of Guiding Principles?

Kenney: We came together as the CRRG because we all believed that we could offer something that has been lacking in the discussion of Colorado River issues: an independent, science-based, and most importantly – a basin-wide perspective. But before we could begin to speak as a group, we had to make sure we all viewed the current problems and potential solutions in a consistent way. That prompted a group discussion about key CRRG messages, the product of which is our "Guiding Principles" document.

Who's your audience?

Kenney: Our audience is everyone who cares about the future of the Colorado River. At a minimum, that's the 40 million people who directly consume water from the river today. But also for those that recognize the river as more than a commodity to be divided up among competing factions. The river is truly a national and global asset. That's a voice that needs to be heard.

If we are successful, the result will be a better-informed public, and that in turn will put pressure on decision makers that refuse to recognize modern realities. We also hope to provide political cover for leaders that understand the need to behave differently going forward but shy from political controversy.

Our website received over 1,000 different visitors in our first 3 weeks of existence. There's clearly a demand for the type of information we are providing.

In your Summary Report, you state that "Water users consume too much water from the river and, moving forward, must strive to use less, not more. Any conversation about the river that does not explicitly acknowledge this reality cannot provide a basis for making sound public policy." Yet you point out that the Basin Plan actually calls for more water consumption in every state. What do you think it will take to get the growth boosters of the basin to come to grips with reality?

Kenney: Even to a cancer, growth at some point becomes self-defeating. In water management that point becomes evident when new consumption undermines the reliability of existing uses. We already see that on the Colorado River. Every new diversion from the river makes it more difficult to satisfy existing needs and rights, to refill strained reservoirs, and to restore flows to depleted river reaches. Ultimately, unsustainable growth becomes a problem for everyone.

The real work can only begin when there is an understanding that an increase in consumption is counterproductive to a healthy river and economy. There are ways to grow without increasing consumption; most large western cities, for example, use the same or less water now than they did 25 years ago, despite significant population growth. That's tremendously encouraging.

Going forward, any new consumption will have to be offset by reduced consumption elsewhere. That can happen in a planned and strategic matter that protects economic and environmental values, or it can happen in a manner that is inefficient, confrontational, and inequitable. Obviously, we advocate for the former, but that requires viewing the problems through a basin-wide lens, and it necessitates a greater use of markets or policy incentives to reward creative problem-solving.

Why do you think the states have been so slow to invest in conservation at the needed level?

Kenney: Historically, the role of the states has been to promote and assist local governments and water districts in their efforts to develop and consume water. Population growth, increased water consumption, and economic vitality were viewed as self-reinforcing. Similarly, the underlying goal of the federal reclamation movement was to promote population growth and economic expansion in the West, and for a long while, it worked.

But this model has generated many indirect costs, especially on the environment, and now that the available water supplies are nearly exhausted, it's no longer viable. That's the new reality in most basins of the West. Yet some water managers still don't acknowledge this new reality. I've spoken to many water managers that argue that the prudent strategy for meeting their local water needs is to expand as fast as possible until all the water is gone. They know that they'll eventually need to get aggressive with water conservation, but they figure that conservation will be easier when they have a large population base using a lot of water, as compared to being restrained or frugal from the beginning.

That's an entirely logical philosophy when viewed from the standpoint of individual, local water systems. But when viewed as a system, it is a recipe for disaster—a classic 'tragedy of the commons' situation. Unfortunately, most decisions about water development and conservation are made locally, and are driven by an assessment of local costs and benefits.

Water conservation is the key to our future. But it cannot continue to be used solely for the purpose of enabling an expansion of consumption by more people. And conservation faces strong headwinds. For starters, conservation has an image problem. To many, it is viewed as an acknowledgement of failure, a call for sacrifice, a symptom of a stagnating society. It's un-American. Conversely, growth, of almost any kind, generally has a positive connotation. Conservation is also woefully unexciting. Low-flow toilets will never inspire the awe and respect of giant dams and pumping stations, especially among the engineers that lead many water agencies. Furthermore, conservation can become a fiscal nightmare for projects that were

financed on the assumption that water sales would generate the revenues to pay bond obligations. And so on.

Water conservation, sadly, is something that is only embraced when there's no other obvious solution available. But when that time comes, the merits of conservation are undeniable: it can alleviate shortages, enhance environmental resources, and save ratepayers money. So at some point, the image of water conservation becomes the positive, and the image of water consumption becomes the negative. I've seen that in some places, such as Tucson. But at the scale of the Colorado River basin, we just aren't there yet.