


LIVING RIVERS

CURRENTS

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DELTA DEFICIT

Wasting Money and Habitat

Congress is about to fund the start-up of a defunct desalting plant on the Colorado River near Yuma, Arizona, dooming critical habitat in the delta region. The Bureau of Reclamation (BuRec), which has recommended that Congress authorize the desalter's repair, is downplaying the results of its own analysis, which reveals far less costly and less environmentally damaging measures to meet US treaty obligations for water delivery to Mexico.

"This is reminiscent of BuRec of the past," says Lisa Force, Living Rivers program director. "At a time when federal deficits are the largest in U.S. history, it's unbelievable that Congress would consider throwing away taxpayers dollars to prop up this glorified treatment plant."



Congress ignores endangered Pupfish

"There are cheaper and less destructive ways to save Colorado River water than running the Yuma Desalting Plant," added Myra Wilensky, regional organizer at the National Wildlife Federation.

BuRec's objective is to produce about 108,000 acre-feet of water from the plant and of sufficient quality to help meet its 1.5 million acre-feet annual obligation to Mexico. Taxpayers will be required to pay \$26 million to replace obsolete technology—plus a minimum of \$36 million in annual operating costs for

the plant. Completed in 1992 at a cost of \$256 million (a five-fold increase in construction costs) to clean up brackish wastewater from farms in southern Arizona, the plant was shut down several months later due to extremely high operating costs.

Another option reviewed by BuRec for the 108,000 acre-feet involves paying willing sellers to lease water they presently do not need, at just 15 percent the cost of starting the Yuma plant. "The Department of the Interior has already proposed an alternative that could save \$30,000,000 every year. Not only does Interior's alternative have great economic advantages, it will also save enough electricity to supply 25,000 people," says Jennifer Pitt of Environmental Defense.

Dr. Peter Gleick, director of the independent Pacific Institute in Oakland, an international water expert said, "Despite the Department of Interior's much ballyhooed 'Water 2025 Plan' claiming a new era in western water management, the decision to reopen the expensive and environmentally damaging Yuma desalter shows that federal water policy is really business as usual — spending taxpayer money for unsustainable water projects."

The agricultural wastewater that the plant would process is now funneled into the Cienega de Santa Clara, a 40,000-acre open water ecosystem in the Colorado River delta region. The desalting plant would remove this flow from the cienega and return only highly saline brine to the wetlands.

"This provision would destroy an extremely important wetland in Mexico that contains the largest remaining breeding population of Yuma Clapper Rail in the world," says Bill Snape, Chief Counsel for Defenders of Wildlife. "It will be impossible to replace the value of the Cienega de Santa Clara to the Colorado River ecosystem."

The Cienega is the largest remaining wetland in the Southwest and is home to fifty-six threatened, endangered and declining species. Several scientific studies funded by the Department of Interior confirm that the wetland would be completely destroyed by desalter operations.

"WATER 2025"

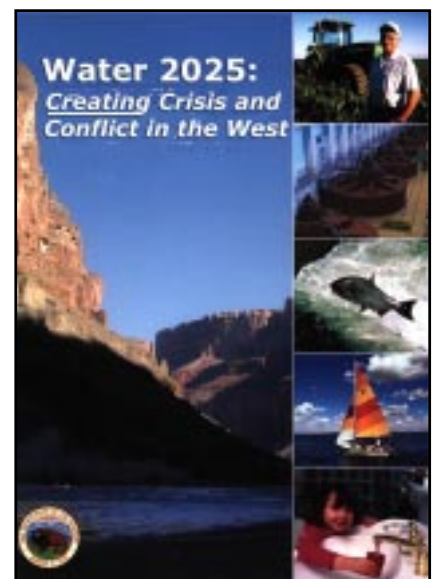
A Crisis in the Making

Throughout the course of this summer, the Bureau of Reclamation (BuRec) has been orchestrating another of its legendary public relations charades. At a time when most Western states are experiencing major problems with water allocation, BuRec is responding with a long-term management plan which completely ignores the problem. Dubbed "Water 2025 Plan: Preventing Crises and Conflict in the West," is little more than a repackaging of management strategies BuRec is already implementing combined with a heightened push for desalinization technology. It contains no proposals for how to substantively address major water shortages, such as those looming in the Colorado River watershed.

"Minor efficiency gains and conservation measures as Secretary Norton prescribes will bring about some savings, but these are merely drops in the bucket given that the Colorado River is providing barely half the water the Department of Interior is contracted to deliver," says Owen Lammers, Executive Director of Living Rivers.

Abundant historical evidence reveals that the present drought in the Colorado watershed is far from unprecedented, and warnings from the United States Geological Survey one year ago urged water managers to be prepared for several decades of below average precipitation. Lammers notes, "Water 2025 demonstrates that the Department of Interior is ignoring this responsibility."

- The Plan emphasizes Interior's long-standing tradition of acquiescing to the states for resolving disputes. However, as eighty years of conflict reveals, cooperation is rare, even in the best of times.
- The Plan's market-driven water banks and transfers from farmers to municipalities during times of shortages are laudable on a small scale, but there is no discussion of what will happen when the real shortages occur. Certainly, the 25 million people reliant on Colorado River water will not be deprived, but what will it cost? Farmers are becoming increasingly reluctant to make water transfers. Without strict federal guidelines and policies, municipalities like Los Angeles, Phoenix, Los Vegas and Salt Lake City will be forced into a cost environment not unlike what California energy utilities faced three years ago.
- Crop substitutions, which represent the greatest opportunities for water savings, are completely ignored by the Plan. Nearly half of Colorado River water is used to grow water-intensive alfalfa and other forms of cattle feed. Much of this water could be saved by growing crops for human consumption.
- The Plan advocates maintaining and enhancing existing infrastructure. However, much of this infrastructure is responsible for the loss of up to 20 percent of the Colorado River's flow due to evaporation and seepage amongst its reservoirs.



Not until the 25-page report's last 100 words does the term "drought" receive much attention. This should be Interior's main focus at this time. Questions Interior needs to be asking include: outlining specific federal management tactics it may employ; how farmers will be enticed or forced to release their water to preserve municipal economies, and will Interior enforce strict conservation strategies and efficiency standards?

"This report is all about carrots with no federal stick," adds Lammers. "Interior must begin developing water use standards and practices, as well as allocation strategies to be implemented as this drought situation worsens. Absent this, crisis is inevitable, despite Secretary Norton's report and marketing strategy titled to prevent it."

RIVERKEEPER

On the Yampa, Green & Grand Canyon

From June 2-6, Living Rivers' Colorado Riverkeeper, in conjunction with Holiday River Expeditions, honored the 50th Anniversary of the first Yampa/Green river trip organized to stop the inundation of Dinosaur National Monument from the Echo Park Dam. The purpose was also to draw attention to the slow death now occurring in Dinosaur National Monument's river corridor due to the operations of Flaming Gorge Dam upstream.

This month the Riverkeeper will return to the Green River. Nine days will be spent in Desolation Canyon, the most remote stretch of wilderness quality river corridor in the continental United States. Like those in Dinosaur National Monument, native fish in this reach suffer from the impacts of Flaming Gorge Dam. This critical stretch, however, is being ignored by federal researchers developing re-operation plans for the dam.

In October the Riverkeeper will undertake a 12-day science trip down the Colorado River through Grand Canyon National Park. Participants will be assisting researchers from Northern Arizona University in collecting data to evaluate how the food base of Grand Canyon's river ecosystem has changed due to the operation of Glen Canyon Dam. Federal scientists are considering ceasing financial support for such research, despite its vital role in understanding the steps needed to recover endangered fish species in Grand Canyon National Park.



Colorado Riverkeeper at Tiger Wall, Yampa River

LR Drought Watch

No Relief in Sight

Federal forecasts for the operation of major dams on the Colorado River indicate that if drought conditions continue, Lake Powell could see another significant drop to 39 percent in one year. Basin-wide storage could drop from 57 to 48 percent as water users continue to use water at pre-drought rates.

BuRec's "2004 Draft Annual Operating Plan" forecasts a range of inflow scenarios for Lake Powell reservoir from 3.8 to 15.6 million acre-feet. This would equate to a range of reservoir levels from 39 to 83 percent. The lower level would represent a near repeat of 2002, when flows into Powell reservoir were 75 percent below normal. Normal flows estimated by BuRec are approximately 12 million acre-feet, flows not seen since 1997.

"During the drought of 1942 to 1977, flows were off by 19 percent. Taking increased diversions above Lake Powell reservoir since that time, which are now approximately 4.7 million acre-feet per year, it's easy to see why Lake Powell continues to drop," says John Weishiet, conservation director for Living Rivers.

Since year 2000, inflows into Lake Powell have averaged just 50 percent of normal: 62, 59, 25 and 54 percent respectively. Presently, Lake Powell reservoir is reported to be at 51 percent capacity, down last year from 59 percent. The actual amount of available water is 50 percent, as BuRec is not compensating for 500,000 acre-feet of storage lost to sediment since its last inventory was conducted in 1986.

If inflows into Lake Powell reservoir continue to average 50 percent of normal, or about six million acre-feet per year, this would result in the reservoir level dropping an additional eight percent to 10.7 million acre-feet, or 44 percent of capacity. This would bring the reservoir elevation down 140 feet from full. Only two of the reservoirs six marinas would be operational. Commercial and private Colorado River rafting trips, which normally end at Lake Powell reservoir, would have no way to get off the reservoir, short of rowing or motoring their rafts to the nearest functioning marina. "This is a multi-million dollar industry that we are about to lose," adds Weisheit. "First they killed the rafting industry through Glen Canyon when they built Glen Canyon Dam, and now they're stopping us from running the rivers upstream too."

GLEN CANYON DAM

LR Demands Supplemental EIS

In a letter submitted this month to Michael Gabaldon, chair of the Adaptive Management Program for Glen Canyon Dam, Living Rivers outlined the justification for the department of Interior initiating a new Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for Glen Canyon Dam. Such an undertaking would compel the federal government to examine decommissioning Glen Canyon Dam as a means of recovering endangered species habitat lost in Grand Canyon National Park as a result of the dam's operations.

Completed in 1996, the existing EIS for Glen Canyon Dam prescribed a set of operational criteria for the dam in an effort to halt the Bureau of Reclamation's violation of the Endangered Species Act in Grand Canyon. So far, all these efforts have failed

- The decline of the Humpback Chub population from 8,000 to 2,000 fish, and the inability to establish a second location in the river corridor for Humpback Chub to live.
- The inability to provide enough sediment for the preservation of beach habitat. The number and size of beaches in the Grand Canyon have experienced a significant decline since the AMP began. This negatively effected the Canyons recreational experience, but has also impacted the river corridor's cultural resources, which are now prone to erosion.
- Unanticipated impacts resulting from reduced elevations of Glen Canyon Reservoir, such as increased temperatures and modified nutrient dynamics could have significant effects on the downstream resources in the Grand Canyon. As the drought situation persists, these effects will become most pronounced.

The key to reinstating National Environmental Policy Act compliance, through a supplemental EIS, is if new data or impacts are recognized. Clearly in the case of Glen Canyon Dam and the Grand Canyon significant new data (biological and sediment) indicate that the system needs to be reevaluated and assessed.

POWELL RESERVOIR

Draining Recreation

The reservoir-draining drought is again revealing canyon walls not seen in thirty years. For example, the National Parks Service's marina facilities at Antelope Point near Glen Canyon Dam will be perched on a cliff's edge this Autumn.

The situation at Hite Marina at the top of Lake Powell reservoir is already disastrous, where a vanishing reservoir has exposed a sediment plug that backs up the Colorado River Arm for 30 miles. Because of the thick, gooey mud, the Hite concessions operator, ARAMARK, has literally pulled anchor and moved their floating docks 50 miles downstream to the marina at Hall's Crossing. Hite Marina is looking like a ghost town of thick mats of exotic weeds and obnoxious tamarisk trees.

Colorado River runners who previously finished their trips at Hite, now have no place to exit. Thoughts of pushing rafts through a choppy reservoir 50 miles further to Bullfrog or Hall's Crossing marinas are not welcomed. Bullfrog's boat ramp is about to become unusable itself, and Hall's Crossing is too small to accommodate all of the visitors now that these other facilities are closing. In desperation, river outfitting companies are attempting to forge a road across the sediment themselves at a location access the reservoir opposite Hite.

In a letter to the superintendent at Glen Canyon National Recreational Area, Living Rivers has reminded the National Park Service that the money targeted for capital improvements at Hite Marina must immediately be shifted toward mitigating the impacts from sediment on the river running public, who typically have to endure the National Recreation Area's bias to the powerboat industry. In 2003 power boaters received three million dollars in improvements related to the reservoir dropping; river runners have received nothing.



Hite Marina boat ramp, decommissioned by sediment

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