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PO Box 466 • Moab, UT 84532 • 435-259-1063

August 11, 2015

Bureau of Reclamation
Attn: Ms. Pam Adams
Lower Colorado Regional Office
PO Box 61470
Boulder City, NV 89006-1470

Sent via eMail: ColoradoRiverBasinStudy@usbr.gov

Subject: Public Comments about the Moving Forward Program

Dear Ms. Adams,

The following represents the comments of Living Rivers/Colorado Riverkeeper and the Center for Biological Diversity on the May 2015, Colorado River Basin Stakeholders Moving Forward to Address Challenges Identified in the Colorado River Basin Water Supply and Demand Study: Phase 1 Report.

The outputs so far, as detailed in the Report, are disappointing. Certainly important relationships are being strengthened amongst a subset of Colorado River stakeholders through the coarse of this process, but little progress has been made toward developing response strategies to the myriad of issues affecting the Colorado River as referenced in the 2009 SECURE Water Act: the legislation that set this process in motion. As a result, this process must be placed on hold, and an independent assessment be undertaken of the work completed to date along with recommendations for how to get it back on track consistent with the intent of the 2009 SECURE Water Act.

Losing Precious Time

Six years have now passed and the Colorado River society of 40 million people has lost valuable time toward developing much needed resilience strategies for this critical water supply. An economy of $1.4 trillion annually sits that much closer to a precipice as Colorado River water consumption continues unabated—well beyond the river's historical carrying capacity and deeper into uncharted, deficit territory due to reduced streamflows brought on by climate change.

During this time, the nation's largest reservoir, Lake Mead, has fallen to just 36% capacity, just inches away from the Secretary of Interior stepping in to declare the first ever shortage condition on the Colorado River.

Meanwhile we have a Moving Forward process that leaves society standing still as its surface water supplies run dry. Instead of embracing the reality that Colorado River water users must get their municipal, industrial and agriculture water budgets more in balance with what the river can provide, the public is provided with a review of existing conservation efforts that by and large still spread the same amount of water among a greater number of users, while looking to farmers to fill in the gaps for cities when severe shortages occur. But what happens when there's no water at all: a consequence of failed planning now facing the 30 million people plumed into California's over-allocated Sacramento/San Joaquin system? Will we have moved forward by then?

Key Science Omitted

The potential for serious shortages on the Colorado River has been know to Reclamation and the Basin's water users for more than a decade. Yet despite this, the 2012 Colorado River Basin Supply and Demand Study stressed that water users should prepare for just a nine percent reduction in flows by 2060. Science, however, warns that flow reductions of at least 30 percent by 2050 should be given serious consideration. There's already been a 15% reduction since 2000. And now a shortage declaration looms.

Despite the 2009 SECURE Water Act stressing the need for the Basin Study to address groundwater, this was ignored in the study and so remains absent from the Moving Forward process. Managing the interplay between surface and groundwater along the Colorado is crucial, as growing water demand and climate change places greater stress on both. Pumping water near streams drys them up, and diverting too much water from streams diminishes their ability to replenish the aquifers below. It's estimated that the Colorado River Basin's groundwater stores are being depleted at a rate of one year's volume of the Colorado River's flow every three years. Restricting basin-wide water planning to flows above ground is setting society up for even greater problems down the road.

Also ignored throughout this process has been the other end of the hydrologic spectrum, flood management, which too was specified in the 2009 SECURE Water Act. Recent studies reveal that the historical rate and frequency of severe flooding on the Colorado River are twice that of what current Reclamation modeling and management strategies account for. Dam operations, at minimum, need to be reevaluated, but so too should land use strategies and zoning policies.

Ecological Afterthought

Another mandate of the 2009 SECURE Water Act left out of the Basin Study was the Colorado River's ecology and recovery of endangered species. Over the past half century the Colorado River's unique assemblage of native fish has fallen victim to dams, diversions and predation by the stocking of non-native sport fish. For example, a top predator in the larger river channels, the Colorado pikeminnow (a large migratory fish), has lost about 80% of its historic habitat. This has all occurred when water was more abundant, and policies in place ostensibly to

protect these species. Recovery efforts, however, must increasingly look toward hatcheries, not in-stream recruitment, as prescribed for in Recovery Plans.

It is within this backdrop that the Moving Forward Phase 1 team has taken up the endangered fish issue. It's objective, however, is not to identify polices to stem this downward slide, but, "… to identify ideas for potential future voluntary, non-regulatory solutions that protect or improve ecological and recreational resources while supporting other management goals to achieve integrated solutions that benefit multiple uses, both consumptive and non-consumptive, including hydropower." If current laws, mandates and statues aren't sufficient, or aren't sufficiently enforced, to reverse the present decline, this Moving Forward approach is anything but for endangered fish.

An Independent Review

As detailed in our March 13, 2013 comments (attached), the Basin Study process overlooked not only critical Colorado River science of the day, but whole hydrologic, geologic and ecologic processes fundamental to any robust river management strategy. The 2009 SECURE Water Act rightly intended all this to be incorporated in this process, but after six years its continued absence raises further concern that it may continue to be neglected. We therefore request this process be suspended until such time as an independent panel of experts has been assembled and reviewed the work undertaken to date, the gaps therein, and provided recommendations on how best to proceed.

The National Research Council of the National Academy of Sciences is best suited for this task. In its independent capacity it has on several occasions already studied aspects of the Colorado River and Colorado River management. Absent such outside guidance, it's unlikely this critical process will ever fulfill the intent of the 2009 SECURE Water Act, and more importantly, meet the needs of the Colorado River society by evolving a resilient river management strategy that embraces all the complexities of this vital human-ecological system.

Sincerely yours,

John Weisheit
Co-founder, Living Rivers

Robin Silver
Co-founder, Center for Biological Diversity

Attachment: LR/CR & CBD comments of March 13, 2013 (PDF)