

Failure to OK drought plan could lead to water cutoff

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SACRAMENTO – Weary of the West's slow pace in developing a strategy to cope with a nagging drought, the Bush administration may sharply curtail Colorado River deliveries for the first time in history if states do not adopt a comprehensive plan by April.

"We won't shy away from making the tough decisions when needed," warns J. Steven Griles, deputy secretary of the Interior Department, in remarks scheduled to be delivered in Las Vegas today.

Griles also is expected to issue another ominous warning: Power production out of Glen Canyon Dam on Lake Powell, an emergency power source for California during blackouts, could be lost as early as 2006 if the current round of Western snowfall does not continue.

The Colorado is a crucial well for Southern California, delivering in good years more than 5 million acre-feet annually – enough for 10 million homes. Even today, after pressure to curb its appetite, Southern California relies on the Colorado for at least 4.4 million acre-feet a year.

The San Diego County Water Authority draws about 65 percent of its supply from the river. The water authority eventually will buy 200,000 acre-feet a year from Imperial Valley farmers – water tapped out of the Colorado.

Griles will send his stark admonition to Colorado River users just as early and heavy snows have sparked hope that the region may be emerging from what some experts say is the worst prolonged dry spell in 500 years.

"It's a friendly reminder that says shame on us if we can't get our act together," said Dennis Underwood, who tracks Colorado River issues for the Los Angeles-based Metropolitan Water District, California's largest wholesaler.

California and six other Western states that share the Colorado have been locked in talks for nearly a year, concentrating on long-term agreements to manage persistent shortages.

There has been some success: Just yesterday, Nevada and Arizona interests ratified an innovative water sale. Nevada will pay Arizona \$330 million to secure 1.25 million acre-feet, enough for 2 million Las Vegas-area households, over the next 15 years. Earlier, Metropolitan agreed to store 10,000 acre-feet for Nevada at no charge.

But deadlock persists over other multistate water sharing, marketing and storage deals as the Colorado shrinks to historic lows. Negotiators also have been unable to agree on a unified approach to long-term curbs to prevent onerous cuts in the future. However, some water agencies have braved public backlash to impose conservation measures independently.

"There are 50 things that can be done," Underwood said.

Negotiations are entangled in a complex legal doctrine known as the Law of the River. Political and financial obstacles also remain.

But perhaps the single biggest hurdle, and one that may never be overcome, is the simple reality that too many interests draw too much water out of the Colorado, many of those involved concede.

Nevertheless, according to the text of his speech, Griles will warn that April will be a defining month for Western water. The Interior Department demands a drought management plan by then. Not coincidentally, at about the same time, the administration will decide whether to start cutting supplies.

"We must accelerate the development of procedures for the administration of shortages on the lower Colorado basin," Griles was prepared to say in an ultimatum clearly aimed at California, Nevada and Arizona.

He will deliver the speech at a meeting of the Colorado River Water Users Association.

Another round of negotiations is expected to convene after his speech, to be delivered at a meeting of the Colorado River Water Users Association.

The administration does not appear to be bluffing. Interior Secretary Gale Norton, who has ultimate authority over the river, told the West's water brokers two years ago to strike a deal to share the Colorado or the federal government would squeeze supplies. Later, Norton boldly cut deliveries to Imperial County farmers when a similar ultimatum was ignored.

Norton already has told the West that no state will receive more than its minimum legal entitlement this year.

More significantly, Norton has ordered an unprecedented review once winter passes to determine whether to invoke emergency powers to curb deliveries. If carried out, it would be the first time states did not receive their full allocations.

"We benefit from the courage and foresight of those who built the great storage reservoirs and conveyance systems in the Colorado River basin that support the Southwest," the advance text of Griles' speech says.

"It is our turn to act with courage and foresight."

With Lake Powell at one-third capacity, and Lake Mead sporting a bathtub ring halfway up its banks, the Colorado's mightiest reservoirs cannot hide the crisis.

Snows across Utah and Colorado mountain ranges, which feed the Colorado, have increased the runoff forecast to 92 percent of normal. Yet, experts say it will take at least five years of good rains and snows to refill lakes Powell and Mead.

Griles, though, will point out that "last year we also saw early signs of promising conditions – and then we saw the snowpack literally evaporate in a hot, dry spring."

That could be bad news for California and the West on another front: electricity.

With each dip in the level of Lake Powell, power production declines. Generators are running at 70 percent capacity.

"We could lose all power production from Glen Canyon Dam in the spring of 2006 – just over a year from now," Griles plans to say today.

Powell's Glen Canyon Dam supplies power to farms and more than 1 million residents in Arizona, Utah, Wyoming, Colorado, New Mexico and Nevada.

California has a keen interest, even though not one light here depends on electricity generated by Glen Canyon – except in emergencies. Then, California can obtain backup power through exchange deals involving Lake Powell, as it did during the blackouts of a few years ago.

Environmental disputes over the dam may intensify as Powell drains. Some conservationists are calling for the dam's removal, saying the loss of production during the drought proves that alternative sources are readily available.

But the federal Bureau of Reclamation, which operates the dam, counters that prices have been pushed up as Powell's production declines.

"Power is still in short supply, and power is expensive," said Barry Wirth, a spokesman for the bureau.

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