

Welcome to The Spectrum, St. George, UT



Monday, February 18, 2008

Will there be water?

Perhaps the meeting last month between the Washington County Water Conservancy District and area developers was premature. Considering that the federal government has restricted the West's most essential water source, the Colorado River, with a potential declaration of a shortage that could go into effect as soon as 2010, where does that leave the proposed Lake Powell pipeline? Will there or won't there be water and if there's a chance there won't be, shouldn't alternatives to the pipeline be planned?

According to published accounts, federal guidelines - which are in effect for the next 18 years - will permit federal water managers to turn the control of the Colorado River deliveries over to the Department of the Interior when an official shortage has been stated. In the last decade, Lake Powell and Lake Mead, which are both tributaries of the Colorado River, have experienced receding shorelines evident by the contrasting white rock walls against the half-empty reservoirs that once covered them.

The cause for such a drastic decline in water is the decade-long drought that has been called the worst in the historic record of the Colorado River by scientists, environmentalists and area residents who have witnessed the depletion over the years. Federal hydrologists have even projected that Lake Mead, which receives water from Lake Powell, may never refill again.

Anticipating a potential water war, the federal guidelines - ironically called "an agreement to share adversity" - set forth amendments to the law of the 1922 Colorado River Compact without changing the designated flow to the seven states that rely on the river as a major water source. This flow was divided equally between upper and lower basin states, with the demarcation line set at Lee's Ferry, located in northern Arizona's canyon country close to the Utah border.

Wyoming, Colorado, Utah and New Mexico are designated upper basin states and California, Arizona and Nevada are lower basin states. Each basin was to receive 7.5 million acre-feet per year. Among the new guidelines that will impact the allocations is a set water-level of Lake Mead that would constitute cutbacks, which have been estimated to total less than 10 percent of the lower basin's allocation.

Should it be deemed necessary to enforce reductions, the guidelines also say that Lake Powell and Lake Mead will be operated as one reservoir system to make it easier to control shortages. States will be able to hold their water in that combined reservoir annually but may require conservation standards, which will limit what the states can and cannot use from year to year.

Most Utahns can remember the \$60 million pumps installed in the late 80s at the Great Salt Lake to drain excess water to the Bonneville Salt Flats. Initially they worked, but as the lake's water level fell, so did the use of pumps that are now more of a remnant of history than a water drainage system. Can Southern Utah afford to take lofty economic chances when water deliveries are so unsure in the near future? This a question deserving of a firm, solid answer before multi-millions are invested into a pipeline that may have its spigot turned off by the feds.