

Glen Canyon still a lightning rod

By Nancy Perkins

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Fifty years after the first explosive blast signaled the beginning of construction on Glen Canyon Dam and its mission to store and manage millions of gallons of water from the Colorado River, critics of the massive federal project are calling for its demise while other experts say it's vital to the West's water-storage system.

"Glen Canyon Dam is a boondoggle," said Richard Ingebretsen, president of the Glen Canyon Institute in Salt Lake City. "It has wreaked havoc on the ecosystem of a beautiful river. Of all the dams that are useless, this place, Glen Canyon Dam, is the worst."

On Thursday, the Bureau of Reclamation will host a 50th anniversary celebration of the Colorado River Storage Act of 1956 at Glen Canyon Dam. The act also authorized the construction of Flaming Gorge Dam. Mark Limbaugh, assistant secretary of water and science for the Department of the Interior, is scheduled to speak at the invitation-only event.

Dennis Strong, director of the Utah Department of Water Resources, said Glen Canyon Dam is fulfilling its purpose, not only as a critical piece of the



Douglas Gibson, U.S. Army
President John Kennedy
visits Salt Lake City in 1963
to mark completion of Flaming Gorge Dam.

West's vast water storage program but in its role as a hydroelectric power plant producing electricity for nearly 6 million customers.

"There will always be a conflict between those who think we should let water run down the river and those who think we should manage it as a resource," Strong said. "Glen Canyon Dam and Lake Powell have functioned exactly as they were designed to do. They have allowed the upper Colorado basin states to deliver water to the lower basin states and fulfill their contract."

In 1956, Congress passed the Colorado River Storage Project Act, or CRSP, which authorized the initial construction of four large dams and reservoirs, including Glen Canyon Dam and Flaming Gorge Dam on the Green River tributary, to help tame and store 34-million acre-feet of water from the turbulent Colorado River.

Seven states — Arizona, California, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, Utah and Wyoming — and Mexico all claim various complicated legal water rights in the Colorado River.

At the time of its passage, the act generated controversy because of its massive scope.

Environmentalists argued the giant reservoirs would waste water through evaporation and seepage, and that the salt content in the water would rise. Sediment that normally flowed unimpeded down the Colorado River, they argued, would eventually clog the system and ruin the comprehensive system of dams, reservoirs, spillways and other measures taken along the length of the river.

"Now that 50 years have passed since the arguments were first made, the warnings have turned into fulfilling prophecies," said John Weisheit, conservation director of Living Rivers in Moab. "Instead of celebrating, the Bureau of Reclamation should be performing a wake for the pending funerals of communities that will run out of water once these reservoirs bottom out and the rivers run dry. It's time to develop a new project, the Colorado River Survival Project."

Don Ostler, executive director of the Upper Colorado River Commission in Salt Lake City, takes exception, saying CRSP projects such as Lake Powell have proven their worth.

"The construction of Glen Canyon Dam and other CRSP projects by the Bureau of Reclamation have been a lifesaver already for the people who use this water because of the recent drought," said Ostler. "I say we're not finished with the drought, either, with six out of the last seven years of precipitation below normal."

Even though both Lake Powell and Lake Mead, located further downstream near Las Vegas, are currently less than 50 percent full, the two reservoirs are meeting their obligations, he noted.

"If we didn't have Lake Powell, Lake Mead would have been empty by now," Ostler said. "We could not have supported the needs of the people without these two reservoirs. They are critically important and will become much more important in the future."

Lake Powell first reached capacity in 1980 and has had its ups and downs since then, although it was considered to be at its full capacity in 1999. Several states, including Utah, have initiated conservation measures aimed at curbing water use at every level.

"I'm darn proud of what Utah has done in reacting to a campaign of wise water use," Strong said. "I know we've been aided by the drought; that's certainly speeded up conservation. Six years later, we have a 13 percent reduction statewide in water use, and that's pretty amazing."

The challenge for water managers, Strong said, is to learn how to improve on the systems that are now in place.

"Society's needs change and as we learn more, we need to make adjustments," he said, adding one of the biggest challenges could be changing the attitude most people have when it comes to water conservation.

"As I look out my window here in Salt Lake City I can see green trees around the Capitol and barren mountains in the distance," he said. "We have an ethic in this state of being green. Conservation is going to have to play a larger role."

Add to that the alarm sounded by scientists around the world that global warming is shifting the Earth's climate, and the astounding population surge in cities throughout the west and "water wars" are bound to occur, Ingebretsen said.

"When are we going to stop building these megacities in the Mohave Desert?" he asked. "The Colorado Plateau is an extremely fragile ecosystem and my big plea to developers and the Bureau of Reclamation is to consider the animals, plants, reptiles and

other creatures that live here. Somehow we've got to teach people that we cannot grow at the expense of other species."

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