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19. COLORADO RIVER

After winter rains, upper basin states mull water strategy

April Reese, *Greenwire* Southwest reporter

SANTA FE, N.M. -- As Lake Mead swells after an unusually wet winter, states in the Colorado River's upper basin may ask federal water managers to reduce Lake Powell releases to help the basin meet future delivery obligations.

Under the Colorado River Compact, seven states -- Utah, Wyoming, Colorado and Utah in the upper basin and Arizona, Nevada and California in the lower -- share the river's water. Lake Powell, on the Utah-Arizona border, stores water from the upper basin to send downstream to Lake Mead, where it is tapped by lower basin states.

The Colorado River states are currently trying to craft an agreement on how to handle a potential water shortage in the basin. The states are under a federal mandate to come up with at least a framework for an agreement by mid-April (*Greenwire*, Feb. 11).

But as consensus on a water shortage agreement remains elusive and rains fill Lake Mead, the upper basin states say they may ask the Interior Department, which oversees management of the complex plumbing that distributes the river's water, to cut releases from Lake Powell. That would help even out storage of the river's water between the two basins, upper-basin water managers say.

"There is a great deal of concern about how low Lake Powell is ... and Lake Mead has largely recovered, at 62 percent of capacity," said Dan Ostler, director of the Upper Colorado River Commission. "Lake Mead is almost at unprecedented levels, and something needs to be done to address the levels at Lake Powell."

Levels in Lake Mead, on the Arizona-Nevada border, have risen 22 feet in the last five months, while Lake Powell continues to shrink.

"All we're talking about is what we would probably do if no agreement is reached with the lower basin," said Scott Balcomb, a Colorado attorney who is participating in the talks, emphasizing that the upper basin states have not decided whether they will actually ask the Interior secretary to reduce releases from Lake Powell.

Despite a five-year drought, the upper basin states have been able to meet delivery requirements to the lower basin states and Mexico. But the releases made to comply with those requirements, coupled with reduced levels due to the drought, have shrunk Lake Powell to a historic low of 34 percent of capacity.

So far, the drought's pain has been greatest in the upper basin. Under the compact, the upper basin states must deliver 75 million acre-feet of water to the lower basin over a 10-year period, or an average of about 7.5 million acre-feet a year.

The upper basin has met that obligation, but if levels in Lake Powell fall further, that could become more difficult. Cutting releases from Lake Powell would help the upper basin continue to make its deliveries, Ostler said. If it could not meet those obligations, the upper basin would have to cut back water use to ensure that enough water

made it downstream to the lower basin.

"The storage in Powell right now is such that there's not a sufficient reserve to allow the upper basin to continue to go through more drought without curtailment, so it reduces the risk that the upper basin would have to curtail [water use]," he said.

With rains filling Lake Mead and tributaries that feed the lower river, the lower basin states are less dependent on releases from Lake Powell and would not be hurt by a cut, water managers in the upper basin said.

But Larry Dozier, deputy general manager of the Central Arizona Project, which delivers water to Phoenix and Tucson and regional farmers, said he sees no reason why releases from Lake Powell should be cut. While Lake Mead levels may be on the rise now, levels in Lake Powell will increase when the melting of the snowpack in the spring feeds the upper Colorado River, he said.

"They're talking about trying to do it in this water year, which ends Oct. 1, even though Lake Powell will recover better than Lake Mead," he said.

"They think they have rationale for releasing less (from Lake Powell) just because the lower basin has had a good year," Dozier said. "In September, we said we'd consider doing something in Lake Powell if necessary, but conditions are better than we predicted" throughout the basin, he said, with significant rain in the lower basin and soon-to-melt snowpacks in the upper basin. The lower basin has very little snowpack, he said.

After the spring runoff, Lake Powell is expected to be 40 feet or so higher, while Lake Mead levels will decrease as water users draw on the newly swelled reservoir, Dozier said.

Cuts from the upper reservoir could affect the lower basin's states ability to share the pain of a shortage, Dozier said. "The shortages have to do with reducing less from Lake Mead," he said. "By them reducing releases [upstream in Lake Powell], it would make us have a shortage quicker."

Nevertheless, the new buzz in the upper basin about keeping more water in Lake Powell is not affecting negotiations over the shortage criteria, he said. The states are "doing pretty good" in reaching agreement on the shortage recommendations, Dozier said.

"I think we're going to get there," he said.



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