River Report

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THIRSTING FOR ANSWERS:

How is the Colorado River Basin Coping with Record Drought?

Telltale white “bathtub rings” reveal land normally submerged deep in reservoirs. Farmers wonder if there will be enough water to irrigate their crops. One urban water agency pays customers to tear out water-guzzling lawns. Desiccated, brown piñon pine trees dot mountain hillsides, candidates for insect infestation or tinder for wildfires.

These are snapshots of the Colorado River as it endures the driest period in its recorded history. The four- to nine year drought (depending on one’s location) gripping the seven-state region has many wondering how much longer the world’s most managed river system can continue meeting the many demands made of it.

Forecasters had predicted the 250,000-square-mile Colorado River Basin would receive about 90 percent of its average precipitation runoff this year, but after a drier-than-normal March, a fifth straight year of drought looms, raising concerns about future shortages and increasing conflicts among the river’s many users.

But as bad as this drought is, the water storage systems and policies under which they operate have carried the Basin and the more than 25 million people who depend on the river without major shortages – so far. Some observers think shortages could occur as soon as 2006.

“The Colorado River has had many wet and dry cycles, and this is one that may be out of line with past ones,” said Robert Johnson, regional director for the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation’s (Reclamation) Lower Colorado Region. Reclamation officials estimate that the two major reservoirs on the Colorado River, Lake Mead and Lake Powell, can continue to operate normally for at least two more years. But even if precipitation returns to average amounts soon, Reclamation Commissioner John Keys estimates it would take more than a decade of those “average” years to refill the two reservoirs.

Concern is growing in both the Upper and Lower Basins that a continuation of the drought could trigger interbasin and intrabasin conflicts. The Upper Basin has an obligation under the 1922 Colorado River Compact to deliver 75 million acre-feet of water (7.5 million acre-feet per year) to the Lower Basin over a 10-year period for beneficial uses. Upper Basin reservoirs could be tapped to meet that obligation to the Lower Basin. Meanwhile, a shortage condition in the Lower Basin could jeopardize some of Arizona’s water supply because the water rights of its Central Arizona Project (CAP) are junior to neighboring California and Nevada.

However, observers think such conflicts are unlikely because it would take another four years of drought to create those extreme conditions. Nevertheless, the drought is forcing stakeholders

up and down the river to think some previously unthinkable thoughts such as local shortage-sharing arrangements in some areas and possibly shortage guidelines that might kick in before emergencies occur.

This issue of *River Report* looks at the extent and effects of the current drought in the Colorado River Basin, and examines the steps being taken or considered by the Interior Department and various stakeholders to cope with the drought