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Writers on the Range

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Balken: Water plan about reservoirs, rivers (column)

A collaborative new plan to conserve water isn't really about conservation; it's about hydropower.

The plan is called the "Colorado River Conservation Partnership," and it was launched by the federal Bureau of Reclamation, the Southern Nevada Water Authority, Denver Water, the Central Arizona Project and the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California. Funded by BuRec and the water districts, the plan asks cities and farmers to use less water by fallowing fields, transitioning to more efficient crops, and encouraging frugal consumption.

This plan, however, doesn't attempt to protect rivers. Instead, as Rose Davis of the BuRec's Lower Colorado Office acknowledges, "Its sole purpose is to boost reservoir levels." For the Upper Colorado River Basin states of Utah, Colorado, Wyoming, and New Mexico, that means moving more water to Lake Powell.

Nearly everyone agrees that conservation is needed basin-wide, but storing water in Lake Powell, the most wasteful reservoir in the system, isn't about saving water. Upper Basin officials fear that if Lake Powell shrinks too much, the reduced hydropower generation will drastically hike electric rates. They also fear that without Powell, they won't be able to deliver 7.5 million acre-feet of water per year to the Lower Basin, as required under the 1922 Colorado River Compact. But several options are available for addressing these concerns, should the reservoir drop below the generator intakes.

One option involves filling Lake Mead first. This would allow Upper Basin water to flow past Glen Canyon Dam for storage in Lake Mead. A legal analysis published in The Water Report, issue 112, concluded that the plan doesn't violate the Compact, because the counting point for Upper Basin water deliveries could be moved downstream, from Lees Ferry to Hoover Dam. Another option is to release water through Glen Canyon Dam's river outlet works at 3,374-foot elevation. There's also the option of drilling bypass tunnels — as former Reclamation Commissioner Floyd Dominy once suggested.

Upper Basin officials say that losing generation at Glen Canyon would cause a “spike” in electric power prices, raising rates by as much as 500 percent. This is highly unlikely. Glen Canyon Dam’s power may be marketed to 174 Southwestern utilities and providers, yet it contributes less than 1 percent of the total capacity of the Western power grid. There are also alternative power sources available.

If Glen Canyon Dam went offline, gas-fired power plants could instantly meet the demand at a similar cost. In fact, given Lake Powell’s recent decline, the dam has already been producing only 60 percent of its generating capacity. Yet no electricity rate “spikes” have occurred.

Another concern is that losing Glen Canyon Dam’s hydropower revenues would cut funding for managing endangered fish species on the Colorado. But Dave Wegner, former lead scientist for BuRec’s Glen Canyon Dam environmental studies, says wryly, “Glen Canyon Dam is one of the primary reasons these fish are endangered in the first place, and why the beaches in the Grand Canyon are eroding and damaging archaeological and tribal resources.” A lower Lake Powell would actually benefit native fish and ecosystems.

And think of the water Lake Powell loses naturally. A 2011 article in the Journal of the American Water Resources Association found that every year, 260,000 to 390,000 acre-feet of water seeps into the ground from Lake Powell, and that filling Lake Mead first could save up to 300,000 acre-feet of water — an amount equivalent to Nevada’s entire yearly allotment.

Abrahm Lustgarten, author of ProPublica’s Killing the Colorado series, observes that “one single reservoir would introduce greater efficiency and reliability in the system. If you got rid of Lake Powell, the Colorado River would essentially have 6 percent more water overnight.”

Allowing Lake Powell to flow into Lake Mead would also normalize flows of water and sediment through Grand Canyon and much of Glen Canyon. This would mean Glen Canyon would transition from a reservoir destination to a world-class rafting and hiking destination. With low reservoir levels over the past decade, hundreds of miles of river and side canyons have already begun to be restored to their natural beauty. Anyone who’s hiked down to the Escalante River or floated Cataract Canyon recently knows this to be true.

The concept of filling Mead makes more sense with each passing year as the Colorado River declines. Lake Powell might once have served a purpose. But in today’s “new normal,” there is simply not enough water to maintain both Lake Powell and Lake Mead. It’s time to fill Mead first.

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of 3

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