



Commentary: Fill (Lake) Mead First



JANUARY 15, 2014 6:00 AM • BY THOMAS MITCHELL

The Glen Canyon Institute, headquartered in Salt Lake City, describes itself as dedicated to the restoration of Glen Canyon and the Colorado River to their natural states prior to the construction of Glen Canyon Dam and the filling of Lake Powell.

The nonprofit organization says its focus is educating the public and decision-makers while advocating science-based public policy.

While the institute's primary focus is on Arizona and Utah, one of its ideas for changes would have significant impact on Nevada, where the Las Vegas water agencies continue to press for access to groundwater from four valleys in rural Nevada.

The institute has an acronym for it: FMF, which stands for Fill Mead First.

Their objective is to lower Lake Powell, thereby uncovering natural and cultural sites such as Davis Gulch, Anasazi Canyon, Cathedral in the Desert, Moqui Canyon and Gregory Natural Bridge. This also would speed up the flow of the Colorado River and restore the ecology of the Grand Canyon.

The 710-foot dam changes that ecology by stopping the river's warm, silt-laden flow, instead releasing a colder, clearer flow.

But the ancillary benefit is that it could add as much as 300,000 acre-feet of water — which is equal to Nevada's entire annual allotment from the Colorado River — to Lake Mead by cutting the water lost in Lake Powell due to evaporation and seepage into the banks of the lake.

The Glen Canyon Institute bases this on research by hydrologist Dr. Thomas Myers, who found that 260,000 to 390,000 acre-feet of water seeps into the banks of Lake Powell annually, which the Bureau of Reclamation, the manager of the river, fails to take into account.

While the Southern Nevada Water Authority's plan is to spend \$15 billion to obtain 84,000 acre-feet of rural groundwater, the cost of filling Mead first is nil. The plan requires no new facilities to be built, and no changes in the laws or compacts regulating the river, just a change in bureaucratic policy.

“Filling Lake Mead first before storing water in Lake Powell both saves substantial amounts of Colorado River water and helps restore the river’s damaged ecosystems,” the Glen Canyon Institute asserts. “The FMF plan designates Lake Mead as the primary water storage facility for the Colorado River Basin. Glen Canyon Dam would be operated to allow water to flow through the hydropower plant and outlet works, filling Lake Mead reservoir downstream before impounding water in Lake Powell.

Powell would be kept close to the 3,490-foot elevation, high enough to allow seasonal flow variations, flood control, sediment distribution, power generation, reservoir-based recreation, and more natural water flows through the Grand Canyon.”

Squeezing every drop out of the Colorado River should be a major priority to those who live in the seven states that depend on the river for water.

A year ago the Bureau of Reclamation reported that by 2060 the demand for Colorado River water will exceed supply by 3.2 million acre-feet. One reason is that the river currently supplies water to 40 million people from Denver to San Diego, but that population is estimated to nearly double to 76.5 million by 2060.

Another potential for shortfall is that what we’ve been calling an ongoing drought may not be a drought at all but actually normal conditions.

In 2007, a study of tree rings along the banks of the Colorado River by researchers from the University of Arizona found that the 20th century was the wettest of any century going back to the 4th century B.C.

And the first quarter of the 20th century, when the Colorado River Compact was being drawn up, was one of the wettest quarter centuries in a millennium.

Though the Colorado River Compact divvies up 15 million acre-feet of water for the seven basin states and a treaty allots another 1.5 million acre-feet to Mexico a year, the tree ring researchers estimate that during one megadrought in the 12th century the Colorado River’s entire flow amounted to only 12 million acre-feet.

The proposal to Fill Mead First is cheap, easily accomplished and entirely reversible if circumstances change. But at this point the circumstances are almost assuredly going to get worse and not better.

Thomas Mitchell is a longtime Nevada newspaper columnist. You may share your views with him by emailing thomasmnv@yahoo.com. Read additional musings on his blog at <http://4thst8.wordpress.com>.