



Enough water in the Colorado River?

Western states talking about how global warming will affect demand for water

Bob Berwyn
Vail, CO Colorado
 May 13, 2007

SUMMIT COUNTY — Water levels in the Colorado River could shrink by 40 to 50 percent in the next half-century, with almost unimaginable consequences for the arid Western states that rely on its water, according to some scenarios outlined by the International Panel on Climate Change.

Perched on the cusp of spring runoff, it may sound far-fetched, but it's conceivable that downstream states — Arizona, Nevada and California — could literally turn off the taps in Colorado by staking their full claim to all the water allocated to them under the far-reaching 1922 Colorado River Compact.

Those states have water rights that pre-date Denver's claims on the Upper Colorado. So in the worst-case situation, Dillon Reservoir, for example, could be drained and remain empty, said Glenwood Springs water attorney Scott Balcomb, who represents Colorado in the ongoing negotiations between the upper and lower basin states.

Michael Stewart sits with his sons, Sam, 7, left, and Moses, 3, along the Colorado River this spring. Western states are trying to head off a future show down over the river's water.



Kara K. Pearson/Post Independent

[Click to Enlarge](#)

[Browse Vail Daily Photos](#)

State of the River
When: 7 p.m. - 8:30 p.m., Wednesday
Where: Summit County Senior and Community Center, County Commons, Frisco
For more info: Call (970) 488-2442
Details: A discussion about climate change and how that may affect Western staets' demand for water from the Colorado River.

Conversely, if the upper basin states were to develop their full allotment, users in Southern California might suddenly be denied water they've been using above and beyond their allocated share, Balcomb said, adding that the climate change wild card increasingly points at some of these "flash points."

Some of these issues will be at the crux of the Wednesday's state of the river meeting in Frisco, when Balcomb will discuss the operation of Lake Powell and negotiations with the lower basin states.

Of course, It's not yet completely clear how the global warming scenarios will play out. But one thing is sure — resource managers are paying close attention to the various climate models that predict shrinking snowpacks and earlier and less runoff in the region.

Balcomb said his presentation at the state of the river meeting will focus on how states are negotiating to avoid the showdown.

"We've given Colorado some time to develop new water," Balcomb said.

If the lower basin states live up to their intention to develop new water supplies, it may be possible to avert conflict, Balcomb said,

More and more, talk is turning toward "augmentation," he explained, meaning things like cloud seeding, desalinization and importing water from outside the Colorado River Basin.

At issue is how the overall flow of the river is divided between Colorado, New Mexico, Utah, and Wyoming in the Upper

Basin, and Arizona, California, and Nevada, (with small portions of New Mexico and Utah) in the lower basin. The 1922 compact evenly divided 15 million acre-feet between the upper and lower basins based on historic water levels.

But water managers have recognized that those numbers were based on an unusually wet cycle.

“The world is changing pretty quickly on the Colorado,” said Dr. Douglas Kenney, who closely tracks water issues at the University of Colorado’s Natural Resource Law Center.

“From the standpoint of how the river is managed, it’s changed more in the last five years than in the previous 50,” Kenney said.

On the table now is an environmental study by the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation that outlines several alternatives for tweaking the allocation and management of the Colorado River, as well as Lake Powell and Lake Mead.

“These are discussions that should have happened decades ago. I realize that, from a political perspective, it’s hard to have a difficult conversation until you’re forced to. But people have known for 50 years that the river is over-allocated,” Kenney said.

All the options have similar implications for the upper basin states, Kenney said. The general idea is that Colorado, New Mexico, Utah, and Wyoming get the water that is promised to them under the compact, with a target of 6 million acre feet, according to Kenney.

On the Net

The environmental study of the Colorado River and reservoir operations is online at <http://www.usbr.gov/lc/region/programs/strategies.html>.

[BACK](#) 