

States come together on river health to avoid conflicts

Stakeholders from the various states that utilize the entire Colorado River Basin met recently in Grand Junction to visit about a shared approach to utilize the river's resources. Drought concerns were foremost in the discussions.

"When you see the Upper Basin and Lower Basin sitting up here together, it's because failure is not an option and we need to do something," Rebecca Mitchell, director of the Colorado Water Conservation Board, said at the annual Upper Colorado River Basin Water Forum presented by Colorado Mesa University's Hutchins Water Center Nov. 8.

She was part of a panel discussion made up of participants from five states and a tribal partnership that discussed drought contingency planning, according to a story in the Grand Junction Sentinel.

Officials last month unveiled draft agreements intended to address the threat of water levels further decreasing in Lake Powell and Lake Mead if a long-term drought continues. The agreements include a drought contingency plan for Upper Colorado River Basin states including Colorado, and another for Lower Basin states.

Upper Basin states hope to keep water levels in Powell from falling enough that they would threaten hydropower production and potentially reduce flows to the Lower Basin to a point that Upper Basin water use could be curtailed under an interstate compact, the Sentinel reported.

Christopher Harris, executive director of the Colorado River Board of California, said the efforts to protect water levels in Lake Powell could help prevent "potential catastrophic conflict between basins." He said

details need to be worked out regarding associated agreements being pursued within individual states, and he pointed to what he called difficult discussions going on in Arizona. "They've got some monumental challenges that they're diligently working on," he said.

Harris said California isn't finished dealing with similar issues. "There is no such thing as the cake is baked yet anywhere, I think, in any of our states, but we're all working really hard," he said. The question is who takes reductions in water use and what that means to them economically. "These are big, big issues that each of us in our respective states are trying to grapple with," he said. "We've got a lot of work to do. It's a heavy lift."

In Colorado, the weightiest issue has surrounded the demand-management program storage component. No demand-management program is being proposed at this point. But the Western Slope's Colorado River District is hesitant to support an agreement creating storage for such a program without assurances that any such program would involve only temporary, compensated, voluntary measures for water users such as Western Slope agriculture. Colorado Water Conservation Board staff is drafting a demand-management program policy that Mitchell said will focus on the temporary, compensated, voluntary approach, the Sentinel story reported.

Scott McGettigan with the Utah Division of Water Resources said, "mostly it's been pretty quiet regarding concerns" about the concept of demand management in Utah, with water districts understanding that it would be beneficial to the state.

"Wyoming is 100 percent behind the collaborative, consensus-based approach to solving these problems," Chris Brown, an assistant attorney general for that state, said at the recent forum. But he said the state wants to ensure it won't erode its rights under existing interstate water compacts.

He said one key aspect of the reservoir-operations component of the drought plan is that it requires eventual recovery of any water released from upstream reservoirs to bolster Lake Powell. He said Wyoming and Utah know that Flaming Gorge "is the low-hanging fruit" in terms of where drought water may come from, so recovering that water is important to them.

Rolf Schmidt-Petersen, with the New Mexico Interstate Streams Commission, described numerous projects and water users in the northwestern part of the state that are reliant on Colorado River water.

"These drought contingency plans are critical for maintaining all of the values and all of the projects that we have in this area, and for everybody to live and work together," he said.

The Sentinel reported that Daryl Vigil, with the Jicarilla Apache Nation and the Ten Tribes Partnership, said being able to collaborate and come to consensus are hopeful things in terms of how to start solving long-term issues on the Colorado River. But he believes conservation efforts don't make a significant impact in terms of the supply-demand scenario on the river, and said tribes are seeking a new paradigm for how to look at policy in the basin, "and how we do that given the absolutely large amount of people — 40 million plus — in the basin."

Last week's forum also focused on how pilot efforts to pursue demand management have been going, including in the Grand Valley of Colorado. Fruita farmer Troy Waters, who also sits on the Grand Valley Water Users Association board, told how he participated in such a program this year despite his

skepticism about the idea. One thing he learned was that fields that were fallowed through the program this summer required higher-than-normal water to saturate and sprout winter wheat this fall.

He sees some potential benefits from such a program, but continues to worry about potential outcomes such as loss of water rights or unfair compensation for participating. Still, he said, "It seems to be the wave of the future so I guess we need to talk about it."

Kevin Cotner, a Utah hay producer, also decided to participate in a pilot conservation program despite his hesitations. "We have to be proactive on this. If not, someone will show up at the door eventually and say we're going to take that (water). Somewhere down the line that's in our future as ag people if we don't try to get ahead of this curve somehow," he said.