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Growing thirst

Other states clamor to get a bigger supply from the Colorado river.

By Dale Kasler -- Bee Staff Writer - *(Published December 24, 2002)*

HENDERSON, Nev. -- To understand why California is facing a water crisis, come to Nevada and tour the flourishing housing development that Del Webb Corp. is building in this Las Vegas suburb.

Drive past the artificial waterfall at the entrance to Anthem, the master-planned community carved out of the Nevada desert. Head past the Hale Irwin-designed golf course, and go see the homes. There are thousands of them, large and small, finished and unfinished, and they're moving fast.

"That's how things go around here. We buy large hunks of land and start selling away," said Leslie Norvell, a Del Webb marketing manager.

A phenomenal population boom is under way in greater Las Vegas, and it's about to cause a king-sized drain on California's water supply.

Since the 1920s, California has used more than its legal share of the Colorado River, using the excess water as fuel for growth. Now the state is getting a taste of its own medicine. The mushrooming demand for water in Nevada and five other neighboring states means California will no longer be allowed to draw excess water.

It's simply a matter of when. In the unlikely event the state can resolve by Dec. 31 a nasty dispute between the California cities and farmers who use the river, the state will be allowed 15 years to gradually cut back its consumption. If it can't, the U.S. government says it will cut the excess flow all at once, beginning around New Year's Day.

Los Angeles, San Diego and the rest of urban Southern California would immediately lose a third of their total water supply. Although the effects won't be felt on customers right away, because of water held in storage, the cutbacks likely will cause ripple effects statewide before long.

But if California is looking for sympathy, it won't find it among its neighbors.

"It's about time," said Patricia Mulroy, general manager of the Las Vegas-based Southern Nevada Water Authority. "California's been overusing the river for decades."

"I'm rooting for them to shut your spigot off," added Mark Lewis, a director of the Central Arizona Project, a network of dams and aqueducts that delivers water to Phoenix, Tucson and other cities.

Still, there was little celebration of California's woes among the hundreds of Western water officials who gathered at Caesars Palace in Las Vegas last week to discuss the future of the Colorado River.

As they hobnobbed in a hotel that's a monument to excess, those attending the annual convention of the Colorado River Water Users Association were sobered by thoughts of water shortages throughout the West. At a time of record drought on the Colorado, the water being disgorged by California seemed like small consolation.

"The deadline's coming on when we're having a drought," said Larry Dozier, deputy general manager of the Central Arizona Project. "Everyone's reaching his limits. We're reminded of how fragile this resource can be."

Interior Secretary Gale Norton, who told the convention that California wouldn't get any reprieve from the deadline, suggested that the West is in danger of growing beyond its means.

"We no longer have abundant surpluses and full reservoirs," Norton said in her keynote speech. "The era of limits is upon us. The future of the Colorado River will be shaped by drought and population growth."

With the six neighboring states (Arizona, Nevada, New Mexico, Colorado, Utah and Wyoming) clamoring for more water, California entered into a settlement in early 2001 that gave it 15 years to gradually reduce its river consumption to the legal limit -- and until Dec. 31, 2002, to finalize a blueprint demonstrating how it would do it.

The blueprint depended largely on a proposed massive water sale from the water-rich Imperial Valley to the San Diego County Water Authority. Imperial's farmers would have mothballed some land and sold the unused water to San Diego for billions of dollars over 75 years.

The deal collapsed when the board of directors of the Imperial Irrigation District rejected the deal by a 3-2 vote Dec. 9. The directors said state and federal officials were trying to bully them into a deal that would have harmed their rural economy.

Although negotiators tried to revive the deal last week, the outlook was uncertain at best.

Given the stakes, outsiders couldn't believe what they were seeing.

"There's no way I would sit back quietly and let three people in the Imperial Valley bring Southern California to its knees," said Mulroy, the Nevada water official.

The cutbacks will hit hardest at the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, which is last in line to receive the state's share of the river under the complex system of water rights.

But the impact will spread statewide. While MWD has a two-year cushion of water in storage, the agency already is scouring the rest of the state for replacement supplies. It recently negotiated options on a one-year water purchase from Sacramento Valley farmers, enough water to cover about one-fourth of the shortfall. MWD would pay about $40 million for the water, with roughly half the money going for transportation.

Assuming the Imperial deal isn't revived, the Colorado River water being relinquished by California wouldn't immediately accrue to the other states. Rather, it would go into storage at upstream reservoirs as drought insurance. Still, officials in the other states see it as necessary.

"Things are tight and everybody's using all their water," said Arizona official Lewis.

This latest crisis dates to the 1920s, when the river's flow was divided among the seven states by federal legislation and a series of treaties.

California took an extra 800,000 acre-feet a year beyond its rightful allocation -- enough to supply up to 1.6 million households -- but nothing was done about it. Even after the U.S. Supreme Court declared in 1963 that California was exceeding its allotment, there was little pressure from the other states.

"We just didn't use the water," said Herb Dishlip, assistant director of the Arizona Department of Water Resources.

That began changing the past 15 years or so, as the population exploded in cities such as Phoenix, Salt Lake City and Las Vegas. Things came to a head with the creation of a water-banking project in Arizona in the mid-1990s, which provided vast new storage capacity that was shared by Arizona and Nevada. That gave both states the ability finally to utilize their full share of the river, said legal scholar Robert Glennon of the University of Arizona.

That effectively ended California's free ride. When the seven river basin states signed their agreement in early 2001 giving California a 15-year window to gradually scale back its use, it seemed peace was at hand. Now the peace has been imperiled by Imperial's refusal to sell water to San Diego.

In an ironic wrinkle, California's failure to finalize a plan means added hardship for Nevada. The 2001 agreement gave Nevada some extra water, but only if every state, including California, had plans in place by the end of 2002. Nevada officials have begun complaining to U.S. officials that they shouldn't be punished for California's sins.

It's easy to find evidence of Nevada's fast-growing water demands. The era of the Las Vegas mega-casino, embodied at gargantuan resorts like the Bellagio, has added more than 31,000 new hotel rooms to the city's fabled Strip since 1989. The rule of thumb is that each new room translates into a new household of permanent residents, be they casino employees or those who indirectly benefit from the casino boom, said state demographer Jeff Hardcastle.

Others have come, too. For example, retail corporation Williams-Sonoma Inc. has set up a customer care center here. And scores of retirees have come here to take advantage of the state's hot weather and favorable tax climate. Altogether, Las Vegas is adding as many as 7,000 residents a month. The metro area's population has roughly doubled since 1990, to nearly 1.5 million.

The boom is unending, even in the post-Sept. 11 climate. Decades after Howard Hughes and Del Webb first started building in Las Vegas, the companies they founded are shaping monstrous housing developments in the city's suburbs.

The Del Webb project in Henderson, when it's fully built in four or five years, will house 21,500 people. As it is, Henderson (pop. 200,000) already has surpassed Reno as Nevada's second largest city.

And Las Vegas residents have come to understand that their future prosperity depends on the availability of water.

"Nevada hasn't had to use all that much water before, but now we're taking people from all over," said Tracey Donley, a real estate agent in Las Vegas. "They're coming from everywhere -- East Coast, West Coast, even from Europe."

About the Writer

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