

Don't hurt farmers to save the Colorado River

No one denies it: Over-consumption of water and extreme drought caused by climate change are realities driving the Colorado River into crisis. But some solutions are better than others.

Former Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt suggested recently in an opinion (Writers on the Range.org) that "retiring" 10% – some 300,000

acres – of irrigated agriculture would save 1 million acre-feet of the Colorado River. Secretary Babbitt wants the federal government to pay farmers in both the Lower and Upper Colorado River Basins to dry up their cropland.

The imbalance on the Colorado River needs to be addressed, and agriculture, as the biggest water user in the



basin, needs to be part of a fair solution. But drying up vital food-producing land is a blunt tool. It will damage our local food-supply chains and bring decline to rural communities that have developed around irrigated agriculture.

Let's look at the river's problems. First, Secretary Babbitt minimizes the challenge, as the overuse of the river's system is even greater than 1 million acre-feet. The flow is so diminished that the end of the line the Colorado River Delta hardly receives any water.

The three states that make up the Lower Colorado River Basin – including the former Secretary's home state of Arizona – have in recent years consumed at least 1.2 million acre-feet more per year than the 8.5 million acre-feet allotted to them under the 1922 Colorado River Compact.

This overuse has been perpetuated because the Lower Basin states and the Bureau of Reclamation fail to account for the losses caused by evaporation from reservoirs and the transit losses during water deliveries. The first step in fixing the imbalance must be elimination of the Lower Basin's overuse.

Through the Drought Contingency Plan, the Lower Basin is actively reducing its water consumption when Lake Mead hits critically low levels. But while this is a good start, more must be done.

Climate change is a major cause in reducing Colorado River flows, with recent studies putting the reduction between 3 and 5.2% for every 1 degree Fahrenheit rise in temperature. Important water-producing parts of our basin, such as Western Colorado, have already seen temperatures rise by as much as 4 degrees since 1895, and predictions for a 2- to 5-degree increase in the foreseeable future will compound the trend.

It might be surprising to learn that the Upper Basin's annual consumption of Colorado River water -- less than 4.5 million acre-feet -- is far below the 7.5 maf allotted to the four Upper Basin states of Colorado, Utah, Wyoming and New Mexico. But this is hardly the time to increase diversions. To sustain the communities and the ecosystems that depend upon the Colorado River, all water users -- both Upper and Lower Basin states -- will need to consume less water.

The Colorado River District has taken a stand against "buy-and-dry" practices because we recognize the environmental and economic harm of drying up agricultural lands. If the health of the river is balanced solely on the back of agriculture, the 10% suggested by Secretary Babbitt today will almost certainly lead to 20% tomorrow.

In Western Colorado, most of our agriculture is family owned and operated. These family farms provide a local food supply, form the backbone of our rural communities, and

they are already under economic stress. So what can be done to both help the river and keep rural life intact?

Initiatives must be aimed at reducing consumptive losses due to inefficient irrigation systems. At the same time we need to incentivize selective retirement of marginal land, all while providing technical support and funding for growers to switch to higher-value crops. The Lower Basin must reduce the cultivation of highly water consumptive crops in the increasingly hot desert, such as cotton and alfalfa raised solely for export.

Increased funding is better directed to off-farm and on-farm irrigation improvements and growing alternative crops. An example of that kind of effort is the Lower Gunnison Project in Western Colorado, a partnership between agricultural producers, the Colorado River District and the Natural Resources Conservation Service. This project improves diversion structures by piping delivery ditches and modernizing irrigation technology on farms. The producers are also experimenting with new crops such as hemp and hops.

From a purely mathematical standpoint, the Lower Basin has to reduce its 1.2 maf in overuse. That's a big start. But in both basins, agriculture must improve the way it uses scarce water taken from the river. We have no time to lose.

Andy Mueller is a contributor to Writers on the Range (writersontherange.org), a nonprofit dedicated to spurring lively conversation about the West. He is general manager of the Colorado River District and spends his time protecting the flows of the Colorado River and its tributaries in Western Colorado.