



# OPINION: HERE'S HOW TO SAVE THE COLORADO RIVER BY BRUCE BABBITT

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## WRITERS ON THE RANGE CONTRIBUTOR BRUCE BABBITT

It is no exaggeration to say that a mega-drought not seen in 500 years has descended on the seven Colorado River Basin states: Wyoming, Colorado, Utah, New Mexico, Nevada, Arizona and California. That's what the science shows, and that's what the region faces.

**In 1973, faced with deteriorating water quality in the River, the Basin states came together and persuaded the Congress to enact a law known as the Colorado River Basin Salinity Control Act.**

Phoenix, Denver, Las Vegas and San Diego have already reduced per capita water use. Yet they continue to consume far more water than the river can supply. The river and its tributaries are still overdrawn by more than a million acre feet annually, an amount in consumption equaled by four cities the size of Los

Angeles.

To close the deficit, the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation and the states have been struggling to apportion the drastic cuts necessary.

So far, the parties have proceeded by adhering rigidly to historic doctrines: first users have absolute rights, though those rights were based on rosy projections of the river's annual flow.

For example, In Arizona the six million residents of Phoenix and Tucson will lose fifty per cent of their share before California gives up a single drop.

Nevada, which has a 2 per cent share, the smallest of any state, is called on to take more cuts ahead of California, which has the largest share, 29 per cent.

Within California, water to 20 million residents in cities will be completely shut off before farming districts adjacent to and within the Imperial Valley take any cuts.

And in the upper basin, the states of Utah, Colorado, Wyoming and New Mexico are faced with draconian reductions in their entitlements because they must deliver water to the lower basin states.

Brad Udall, a water scientist at Colorado State University, warns that something must give, that we cannot continue with a system that increasingly "violates the public's sense of rightness."

There is a better, more equitable pathway for reducing the deficit without forcing arbitrary cuts. It involves 3 million acres of irrigated agriculture, mostly alfalfa and forage crops, which consume more than 80 per cent of total water use in the Basin.

By retiring less than 10 per cent of this irrigated acreage from production, we could eliminate the existing million acre-foot overdraft on the Colorado River, while still maintaining the dominant role of agriculture. Pilot programs in both the upper and lower basins have demonstrated how agricultural retirement programs can work at the local level. What's lacking is the vision and financing to bring these efforts to a Basin scale.

Fortunately, there's a precedent administered by the Department of Agriculture; it's the Conservation Reserve Program, established in 1985 by the Congress. It authorizes the Farm Service Agency in the Department of Agriculture to contract with landowners to retire marginal and environmentally sensitive agricultural lands in exchange for rent.

Farmers who join the Conservation Reserve remain free to return the lands to production at the end of the renewable contract period, typically 10-to-30 years.

The national Conservation Reserve currently holds nearly 22 million acres under contracts with more than 300,000 farms. This legislation has strong support from the farming community and in the Congress, which appropriates nearly \$2 billion each year for the program.

With this precedent, it's time to create an Irrigation Reserve Program. To work, it must be voluntary, and farmers who participate must be adequately paid for the use of their irrigation rights.

A new Irrigation Reserve on a Basin scale will also require significant public funding. But the mechanism for financing an Irrigation Reserve is already available in existing federal law.

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To fund salinity control projects throughout the Basin, the Congress allocated revenues from the sale of hydropower from Hoover Dam, Glen Canyon Dam and

other federal dams throughout the Basin.

Three hydropower accounts -- the Lower Colorado River Basin Development Fund, the Upper Colorado River Basin Fund and the Hoover Powerplant Act-- continue to capture and allocate revenues to basin projects. Congress should now add financing of an Irrigation Reserve to the list of eligible expenditures.

With these two precedents, the Conservation Reserve Program and the Salinity Control Act, we have the road map to establish a basin-wide Irrigation Reserve. I urge the seven Basin states to make common cause and join together to obtain Congressional legislation.

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Bruce Babbitt is a contributor to Writers on the Range.org, a nonprofit dedicated to spurring lively discussion about Western issues. He served as Secretary of the Interior from 1993-2001.