

Western States Agree to Water-Sharing Pact

By [RANDAL C. ARCHIBOLD](#) DEC. 10, 2007



A dried-up marina on Lake Mead, one of the two primary reservoirs for the Colorado River in the states of Arizona and Nevada. Jim Wilson/The New York Times

LOS ANGELES, Dec. 9 — Facing the worst drought in a century and the prospect that [climate change](#) could yield long-term changes on the Colorado River, the lifeline for several Western states, federal officials have reached a new pact with the states on how to allocate water if the river runs short.

State and federal officials praised the agreement as a landmark akin to the Colorado River Compact of 1922, which first outlined how much water the seven states served by the river — [California](#), [Nevada](#), [Arizona](#), [Colorado](#), [Utah](#), [New Mexico](#) and Wyoming — would receive annually.

The new accord, outlined by federal officials in a telephone news conference Friday, spells out how three downriver states — California, Arizona and

Nevada — will share the impact of water shortages. It puts in place new measures to encourage conservation and manage the two primary reservoirs, Lake Mead and Lake Powell, which have gone from nearly full to just about half-empty since 1999.

The accord is expected to forestall litigation that was likely to have arisen as fast-growing states jockey for the best way to keep the water flowing to their residents and businesses in increasingly dry times. It would be in effect through 2026 and could be revised during that time.

Some environmental groups said the pact did not go far enough to encourage conservation and discourage growth. But federal officials said they took the best of several proposals by the states, environmental organizations and others and emphasized the importance of all seven states agreeing with the result.

“I think for the first time in 85 years we are on the same page,” said Herb Guenther, the director of water resources in Arizona, which had initially balked at some terms of the agreement and was threatening legal action over it.

But with water levels in reservoirs dropping, a record eight-year drought, the prospect that climate change could bring more dry spells and new scientific analyses suggesting the West could be drier than has been traditionally believed, the states were pushed to act.

These factors “forced the issue to the head and we decided to do something unique and different,” Mr. Guenther said.

The agreement, the product of two-and-a-half years of negotiation and study, establishes criteria for the Interior Department to declare a shortage on the river, which would occur when the system is unable to produce the 7.5 million acre-feet of water, enough to supply 15 million homes for a year, that the three downriver states are entitled to.

Water deliveries would be decreased based on how far water levels drop in Lake Mead and Lake Powell. The Bureau of Reclamation, which manages the river system, predicts about a 5 percent chance of such a shortage being declared by 2010, but it all depends on how much the states are able to conserve and, of course, the weather.

The probability projection “does not imply it can’t happen,” said Terry Fulp, a bureau official involved in managing the river.

Water districts, anticipating an eventual cutback of Colorado River water, have been storing large amounts of water and the accord encourages them to continue to do so.

The pact, which Interior Secretary Dirk Kempthorne is expected to sign Thursday, includes a bundle of agreements with the states. One is approval for water managers in the Las Vegas area, which gets 90 percent of its water from the Colorado, to get a greater share of Lake Mead water in exchange for financing a reservoir in California to capture large amounts of river water destined for Mexico but beyond that country’s entitlement by treaty.

“It’s hugely important for us,” said Scott Huntley, a spokesman for the Southern Nevada Water Authority. “This really does provide the bridge for us to get into the next decade.”

But John Weisheit, conservation director for Living Rivers, a Utah-based environmental group, said the agreement sends the message to the states that growth trumps sensible water management. Mr. Weisheit said the conservation should have been emphasized and the government’s computer modeling was overly optimistic about future water supply.

“There is more water on paper than there actually is on the landscape,” he said. “They are looking at this in a way that will allow more development even though the water is not theoretically there.”