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Continued drought brings many questions by Tiffani Chopko

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Spring run-off from high mountain snowpack is usually in full swing by now. But this year, all along the Colorado River and in Lake Powell, it's more like a trickle. For the fifth year in a row, the Colorado River Basin is in drought conditions, putting Lake Powell's water level at the lowest level since 1969, six years after the dam was completed and the reservoir started filling.

Although the low water has created more beaches for riverside camp spots, hydro conditions aren't as promising for generating power. Low water levels at Lake Powell bring many concerns to publicly-owned utilities in the Rocky Mountain and Southwest states.

Winter snowpack led many to believe the end of the drought was near. But low March precipitation dashed hopes that relief was on the way and the drought was coming to an end. On March 1, Colorado Basin snowpack was at 96 percent of average. Snowpack levels dropped more than 30 percent throughout the month due to the dry, warm weather.

Flaming Gorge and Aspinall powerplants on the Upper Colorado Basin are experiencing reduced generation due to drought as well.

What does this mean to Western?

The [reservoir's water level](#) is still high enough for hydro-generation, (as of May 18, elevation level was at 3,586 feet). Because of the drought, Western already lowered its commitment levels for FY04 and will begin to see decreasing generation at Glen Canyon in the coming months. But if the water levels fall below minimum generation levels, (3,490 feet, or 15 percent capacity) generation will stop. Western employees have never dealt with that situation.

"Having a facility the size of Glen Canyon get to the point of not being able to produce power due to drought would be unprecedented," said **Brad Warren**, Colorado River Storage Project Management Center manager.

Western's customer contracts provide us flexibility to meet future changes, since hydropower is a variable resource. While Western has long-term firm electric power contracts with customers, we have the flexibility to modify the amount of energy delivered. Due to changes in hydrology and river operations, Western can revise commitments with adequate notice to customers.

As the drought continues, so does Western's increased costs in purchase power. The current-rate setting study which became effective October 1, 2002, includes \$5 million of purchase power costs per year. In FY03 SLCA/IP purchase power costs were \$80 million and they are expected to be around \$41 million for FY04.

In FY03 Western incurred a \$4 million dollar deficit which is expected to be repaid in FY04. No deficits are expected for FY04, but very little payment toward investment will be available.

What does it mean for our customers?

When Federal hydro-generation is not sufficient to meet contract commitments to customers, such as during times of drought or environmental restrictions, Western purchases power on the open market from other utilities or independent power producers. For example, during dry water years, customers may choose to have Western purchase power to fulfill contract commitments; they may buy what they need from other suppliers; or they may provide their own generation.

Beginning Oct. 1, Western will lower its contract commitment to Salt Lake City Area/

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Integrated Project customers for the next 20-year contract term. Lowering the commitment level is a direct result of the drought.

"We've been working and planning this with our customers for almost a year. SLCA/IP customers are already planning for how they will replace SLCA/IP hydropower. In the first year of the new contract (FY05), Western has reduced contract commitments by 25 percent," said CRSP MC Resource Manager **Clayton Palmer**. Energy deliveries increase incrementally during the 20-year contract term.

CRSP MC staff is studying current hydro projections which show the drought will continue. If this trend continues a rate adjustment maybe necessary to cover the increase costs of purchase power.

(Note: Chopko is a public affairs specialist in Corporate Communications.)

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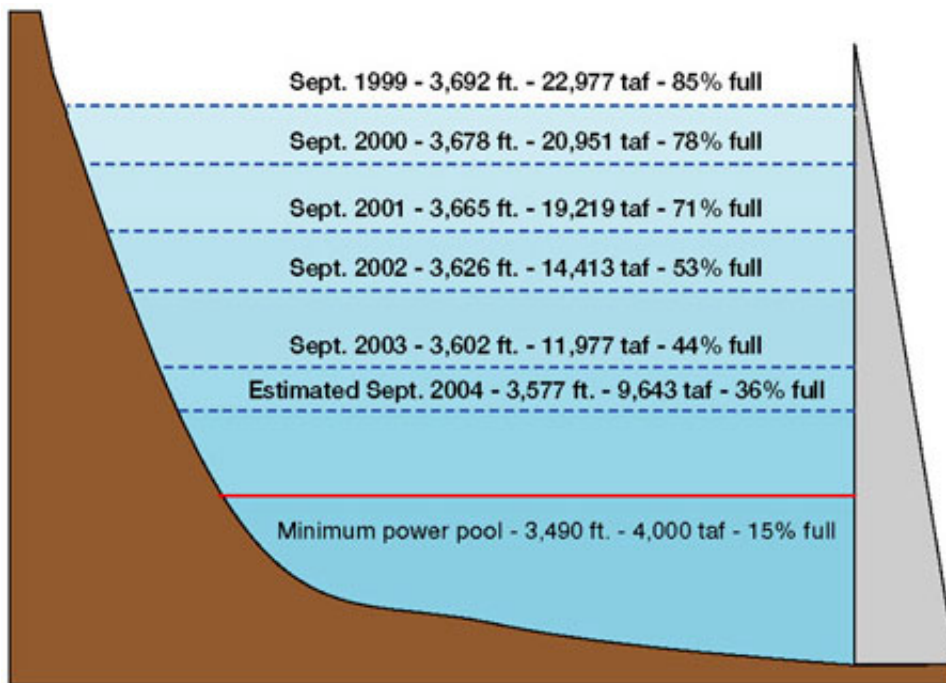
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*taf= thousand acre feet

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