EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S REPORT
TO THE
COLORADO RIVER BOARD OF CALIFORNIA

December 11, 2019

ADMINISTRATION

Minutes of the November 13th Meeting of the Colorado River Board

A draft of the minutes from the November 13, 2019, Board meeting held in Ontario, California, has been prepared and is included in the Board folder for review and proposed adoption during the December 11th Board meeting.

Consideration and approval of the proposed calendar-year 2020 Board meeting schedule

The Proposed calendar-year 2020 Board meeting schedule is included in the Board packet for consideration. The Board's regularly scheduled November 2020 meeting falls on the Veteran's Day holiday. Board staff recommend postponing a decision until later in the year on whether to hold a November meeting or shift the meeting to a different date in November.

Consideration of applications for water subcontracts from the Lower Colorado Water Supply Project

The Board packet includes proposed Board Resolution 2019-1 providing a recommendation to the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation (Reclamation) for an application contract for the use of Lower Colorado Water Supply Project Water for one parcel of land in San Bernardino County, California, for a total of 2.0 acre-feet per year of current and future use. Board staff recommends that the Board approve Resolution 2019-1 during its meeting on December 11, 2019.

Background

In 1986, the U.S. Congress enacted the Lower Colorado Water Supply Act of 1986 (P. L. 99-655) as the mechanism to enable water users within California without contracts or with contracts for an insufficient amount of water to collectively obtain by exchange up to 10,000 acre-feet of water per year from the Colorado River for existing and future uses within California. The Lower Colorado Water Supply Act (Act) authorized the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation (Reclamation) to construct the Lower Colorado Water Supply Project (Project). The Project consists of well-field facilities in the Sand Hills area along the All-American Canal in Imperial County in extreme southeastern California.

The purpose of the Project is to "supply water for domestic, municipal, industrial, and recreational purposes only." Supplying water for agricultural use is not an authorized purpose of the Project. The Act limits eligible Project beneficiaries to include "persons or Federal or non-Federal governmental agencies whose lands or interests in lands are located adjacent to the Colorado River in the State of California, who do not hold rights to Colorado River water or whose rights are insufficient to meet their present or anticipated future needs as determined by the Secretary."

In 2005, the Act was amended to authorize the Secretary of the Interior to enter into an agreement with the City of Needles for the design and construction of Stage 2 of the Project that will add 5,000 acre-feet of capacity to bring the Project to its full, authorized capacity of 10,000 acre-feet. The amendment further authorized the Secretary to contract with additional entities who hold Section 5 contracts for municipal and industrial uses within the State of California for the use of any unused Project water (P. L. 109-103, Sec. 203).

Since 2001, the Board has received over 650 applications for use of Project water and the Board has recommended the approval of applications for LCWSP water that total approximately 5,900 acre-feet of water for subcontracting with the City of Needles.

COLORADO RIVER BASIN WATER REPORT

As of December 2nd, the water level at Lake Powell was 3,611.20 feet with 12.85 million-acre feet (MAF) of storage, or 53% of capacity. The water level at Lake Mead was 1,083.89 feet with 10.34 MAF of storage, or 40 of capacity. As of December 1st, the total system storage was 31.21 MAF, or 52% of capacity, which is about 3.9 MAF more than system storage at this same time last year.

As of December 2nd, the Upper Colorado River basin reservoirs, excluding Lake Powell, ranged from 68% of capacity at Fontenelle Reservoir in Wyoming; 90% of capacity at Flaming Gorge Reservoir in Wyoming and Utah; 92% of capacity at Morrow Point and 77% of capacity at Blue Mesa Reservoir in Colorado; and 79% of capacity at Navajo Reservoir in New Mexico.

For Water Year 2019 the observed unregulated inflow into Lake Powell was 12.95 MAF (120% of normal). The observed April to July 2019 runoff into Lake Powell was 10.41 MAF (145% of normal). The November observed Lake Powell inflow was 0.40 MAF (85% of normal), and the December Lake Powell inflow forecast is 0.33 MAF (91% of normal). To date, the Water Year-2020 precipitation is 81% of normal and the current Basin snowpack is 120% of normal.

COLORADO RIVER BASIN PROGRAM UPDATES

Salinity Control Program Update

Reclamation published the Draft Paradox Valley Unit (PVU) Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) on Friday December 6th for a 60-day public review and comment period. The Basin States will be briefed on the Draft EIS on December 11th at the Colorado River Water Users Association meeting in Las Vegas, Nevada. The Basin States anticipate scheduling one or more special meetings in December and January to discuss consensus recommendations for a Paradox Valley Unit project preferred alternative. The Final EIS is scheduled for release in May 2020, with a Record of Decision to be issued in June 2020.

GENERAL ANNOUNCEMENTS AND UPDATES

Basin States Climate and Hydrology Work Group

Board Staff participated in the November 12, 2019, Basin States Climate and Hydrology Work Group meeting held in Salt Lake City, Utah and via webinar. The Work Group received an update on the draft Colorado River Basin Climate and Hydrology State of the Science (SOS) Report and discussed the proposed public roll-out of this document. The SOS report provides a comprehensive assessment of the current and future trends in climate and hydrology factors within the Colorado River Basin, including information used to support current and projected water supply assessments by Reclamation. The Work Group also received updates from project leads on several Work Group funded activities.

Washington, D.C. Updates

Appropriations Update

Before the Thanksgiving holiday, Congressional appropriators reached agreement on top-line allocations for all twelve annual spending bills, including the Energy and Water and Interior-Environment spending bills. This allows the appropriations subcommittees to come to their own agreements and for the Congress to finish out and conference the remaining appropriations bills that it is still working on. However, it appears that enactment of Fiscal Year 2020 Congressional appropriation bills are stalled amid the administration's dissatisfaction that a border wall funding agreement has not been reached. If the President does not sign any funding deal passed by Congress by December 20th, the government will be shut down. It is more likely that the Congress will pass a Continuing Resolution before December 20th to keep the federal government funded until January or February 2020, allowing for time to continue discussions between the Congress and the administration.

WaterSMART Grant Funding Available

On November 8th, Reclamation announced available grant funding under the WaterSMART Drought Response Program. The grants provide up to $200,000 per agreement to develop new drought plans or update existing ones, and require a 50% non-federal match. Eligible applicants for funding include states, tribes, irrigation districts, water districts, or other organizations with water or power delivery authority located in the 17 Western United States and Hawaii. Work must be completed within two years of the award. Applications are due on February 5, 2020. Applications can be submitted here: https://www.grants.gov/web/grants/search-grants.html?keywords=BOR-DO-20-F003

Irrigation and Water Scarcity

The Government Accountability Office (GAO) concluded a review of farm irrigation technology and the implications of domestic water scarcity. GAO provided two ways for Congress to address concerns over irrigation water demand. The first way is by promoting the use of irrigation scheduling which uses advanced weather and crop data to calculate when water is needed and how much is needed. The second way is by promoting the use of technologies, like soil moisture probes, that detect how much water crops need. The issue with both proposals is funding and internet connectivity in rural areas. Another conclusion drawn was that increasing irrigation efficiency can increase overall water use because of increased yields and because farmers might use the conserved yields to increase production. Additionally, increased efficiency could reduce downstream runoff because of less upstream waste.

Meeting on Managing Large River Basins

On November 20th, the National Academies of Sciences assembled a meeting of federal scientists and officials to discuss the difficulty of managing large river basins. While this meeting focused on the Mississippi and Rio Grande watersheds, it highlighted ecological and economic services and infrastructure tied to these river basins as well as management challenges that they face. The takeaway from this meeting is that more data on natural components of river systems can inform better management. This includes improving human understanding of geomorphology, geology, surface and ground water systems, aquatic and terrestrial habitats, and seasonal and long-term weather patterns.

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