

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

March 13, 2019

## **ADMINISTRATION**

### Minutes of the February 13, 2019 Meeting of the Colorado River Board

A draft of the minutes from the February 13<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Colorado River Board of California (Board) that was held in Ontario, California, has been prepared and is included in the Board folder for review and proposed adoption during the March regularly scheduled Board meeting.

## **COLORADO RIVER BASIN WATER REPORT**

As of March 4<sup>th</sup>, the water level at Lake Powell was 3,571.54 feet with 9.23 million-acre feet (MAF) of storage, or 38% of capacity. The water level at Lake Mead was 1,088.20 feet with 10.70 MAF of storage, or 41% of capacity. As of March 3<sup>rd</sup>, the total system storage was 26.72 MAF, or 45% of capacity, which is about 4.8 MAF less than the system storage at this same time last year.

As of March 4<sup>th</sup>, the Upper Colorado River basin reservoirs, excluding Lake Powell, ranged from 34% of capacity at Fontenelle Reservoir in Wyoming; 84% of capacity at Flaming Gorge Reservoir in Wyoming and Utah; 92% of capacity at Morrow Point and 30% of capacity at Blue Mesa Reservoirs in Colorado; and 51% of capacity at Navajo Reservoir in New Mexico.

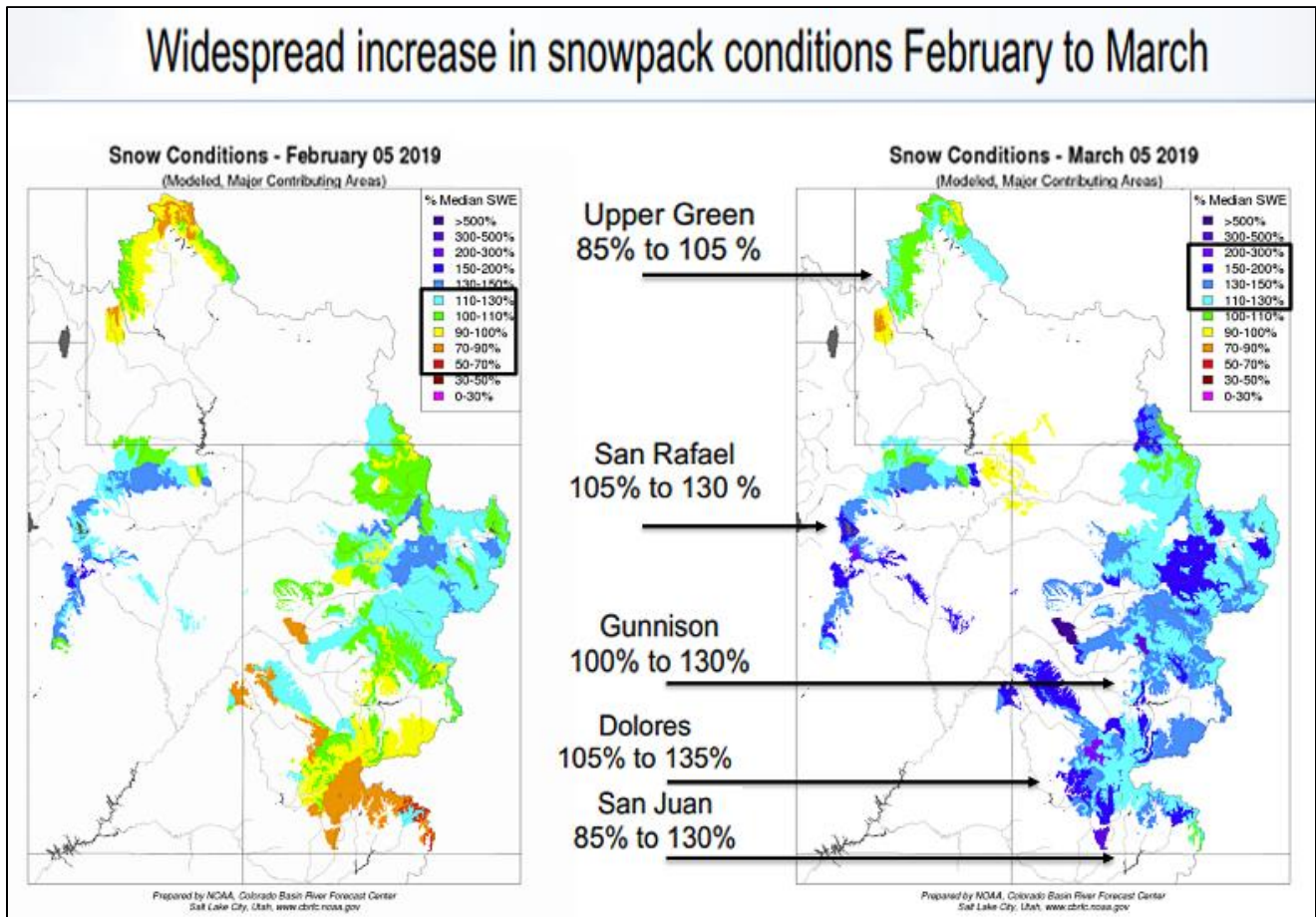
As of March 4<sup>th</sup>, the forecasted inflow for Water-Year 2019 is 9.75 MAF (90% of normal). The forecasted April through July 2019 runoff into Lake Powell is projected to be 7.3 MAF (102% of normal). The February 2019 observed Lake Powell inflow was 0.26 MAF (65% of normal), and the March 2019 forecasted Lake Powell inflow is 0.46 (69% of normal). The WY-2019 precipitation to date is 117% of normal. The current basin snowpack is 123% of normal.

### Colorado Basin River Forecast Center Water Supply Webinar

On March 7<sup>th</sup>, the Colorado Basin River Forecast Center held a webinar to review the water supply conditions and forecast. In February, the Basin experienced above average precipitation and dramatic increases in snowpack throughout the Basin as a result of a persistent trough of low pressure which brought multiple storms rich in sub-tropical moisture. By early March, median snowpack conditions had increased significantly in important runoff producing areas of the Upper

Basin (see Figure 1 below). In addition, streamflow runoff forecasts increased for several watershed basins throughout the Basin.

**Figure 1: February & March Snow Conditions**



Currently, the modeled soil moisture conditions project the loss of some runoff in the Upper Basin due to dry soils. Conversely, it is projected that higher runoff is anticipated in some areas of the Lower Basin as a result of saturated soils in the Verde, Salt, and Tonto Basins in Arizona.

Weather models projected several storms moving into the west coast region during the second week of March. With these current storm-tracks, the moisture in these storms could bring good precipitation to the Lower Colorado Basin and southwestern Colorado depending on how far south the storm systems track through the Basin. Climate models suggest additional precipitation through mid-March and near or above-average April precipitation in the northern portions of the Upper Colorado and Great Basins. A cooler than average March is expected to retain snowpack into April, thus an early runoff is not anticipated.

## **COLORADO RIVER BASIN PROGRAM REPORTS**

### Status of Colorado River Basin Drought Contingency Planning Efforts

On February 25<sup>th</sup> the Commissioner of Reclamation, Brenda Burman, her staff and the Lower Basin principals and agency staff met in Las Vegas to discuss the status of the efforts to complete the Lower Basin Drought Contingency Plan (DCP) and associated proposed new extraordinary conservation Intentionally Created Surplus (EC ICS) exhibits. Each of the Lower Basin states reported on its DCP completion efforts and status. While the majority of the interstate agreements have been finalized and approved by most of the participating entities, it was reported that some work remains to be completed regarding the ICS exhibits before they can be distributed to the Upper Basin states for review and comment. At that juncture, work still remained to resolve an outstanding issue that Coachella Valley Water District (CVWD) had with the proposed EC ICS exhibit put forward by the Colorado River Indian Tribes in Arizona; and there are still lingering issues between the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California (MWD) and the Imperial Irrigation District (IID) with respect to one or more of IID's proposed EC ICS exhibits.

During the meeting, MWD reported that until such time as IID was able to resolve its remaining issues related to its conditional approval of the DCP, that MWD proposed to assume any obligation for an IID DCP contribution during the interim period, should it be required, until such time as IID has fully approved and executed the relevant DCP agreements. MWD indicated that it would be taking this proposal to its Board for action at its March 12<sup>th</sup> Board meeting. The Colorado River Board of California reported that the seven Basin states letter would be brought before the Board at its meeting on March 13<sup>th</sup> for discussion and potential approval and thus provide authorization for the Board's Chairman, Peter Nelson, to sign the letter.

There was a robust discussion of next steps and a potential schedule leading to the completion of final tasks and achieving final approvals for agencies as necessary. Commissioner Burman and others indicated that it was likely that hearings could be scheduled at the end of March in both the House and the Senate associated with the proposed DCP federal legislation. In light of the expiration of the February 6<sup>th</sup> *Federal Register* notice (80 FR 2244) on March 19<sup>th</sup>, Commissioner Burman suggested that it was her desire to finalize the DCP package and sign the seven Basin states letter and send the package on to the Congress on March 15<sup>th</sup> in Phoenix, Arizona.

The seven Basin states held a conference call on March 8<sup>th</sup> with Commissioner Burman and her staff. The purpose of the call was to check-in with each state regarding the status of final approvals of the DCP package and ability to meet in Phoenix on March 15<sup>th</sup> to sign the Basin States letter accompanying the DCP package to the Congress. Bob Snow, with Interior Solicitor's Office, reported that the Lower Basin met on February 25<sup>th</sup> (described above), and that the Upper Basin states met in Albuquerque shortly after that. Reclamation Regional Director Terry Fulp indicated that his staff was working with Lower Basin agencies to finalize the ICS Balances table and description of proposed new EC ICS exhibits that are to be included within the Lower Basin

Operations (LBOPs) document. The Basin States principals and Commissioner Burman charged the drafting group with the finalization of seven Basin States letter, preparation of the final documents, including the ICS exhibits, in readiness for the meeting on March 15<sup>th</sup> to sign the letter to Congress.

There has also been a significant amount of work over the past few days to develop a proposed set of minor modifications to the proposed legislation, an intra-California agreement and the LBOPs document that can provide a solution to the issue raised by CVWD regarding its objection to the proposed CRIT EC ICS exhibit. The small drafting group spent much of the day on March 11<sup>th</sup> vetting these proposed modifications and then appropriately updating all of the DCP documents. These modifications will allow the CVWD Board to review the final DCP package and make a final determination about its participation in the DCP at its Board meeting on March 12<sup>th</sup>.

Finally, Commissioner Burman has asked that the states be prepared to hold a brief check-in call at 3:00 p.m., Pacific, on March 13<sup>th</sup> to receive reports regarding the status and readiness of the California DCP agencies to proceed with the scheduled signing of the seven Basin States letter on March 15<sup>th</sup> in Phoenix, Arizona.

#### Colorado River Basin Salinity Control Program

At the Salinity Control Work Group meeting on February 20-22, in Phoenix, Arizona, the Work Group initiated preparation of the 2020 Triennial Review (Review). The Work Group is developing salt-loading scenarios for water quality modeling analyses, which will be presented to the Forum at its Fall meeting, as well as receive additional guidance and direction regarding preparation of the 2020 Review. The final Review is expected to be completed in late-2020.

The U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) continues to work on the Trends Study, which is an analysis of the effects of land use and landscape changes on water quality in the Upper Colorado River Basin. As you may recall, the study is an attempt to answer why the decreasing salinity trends in the upper basin appear to be flattening out over the past decade and continuing to decline over time. The USGS continues to collect and review the data and expects to have the report completed in the latter half of 2019.

The USGS also continues to study the geohydrology of the fault zone at Pah Tempe Springs and the feasibility of developing a point-source salinity control project. The USGS is working with the Washington County Water Conservancy District to complete the drilling of a series of test boreholes as part of the last phase of the study project.

Reclamation updated the Work Group on the status of the Paradox Valley Unit Alternative Study Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). The alternatives being considered for this EIS are (1) a second injection well to replace or supplement the existing well, (2) evaporation ponds, and (3) zero-liquid discharge technology. The 30% design report for the injection well alternative was completed in December and posted on Reclamation's website at the following web address: <https://www.usbr.gov/uc/envdocs/reports/20181211-ParadoxValley2ndWellDesign-FinalReport->

[508-WCAO.pdf](#). The final reports for the zero-liquid discharge technology demonstration projects will be posted on the website soon. Reclamation is also in the process of coordinating with the U.S. Bureau of Land Management and DOI solicitors regarding EIS content and the review process. The draft EIS is expected to be released for review and comment available in late-2019.

On Monday, March 4<sup>th</sup>, a Magnitude 4.1 earthquake occurred near the Paradox Valley Unit injection well near Bedrock, Colorado. The well was shut off for maintenance when the earthquake occurred and will remain so while Reclamation follows protocol to evaluate injection rate and operation schedule going forward. More information on the earthquake can be found in the Board packet in the memorandum from the Salinity Control Forum and a press release from Reclamation. Staff will continue to update the Board and agencies regarding the status of the Paradox Unit.

The next Work Group meeting will be held in Salt Lake City, Utah, on April 17-18. The Forum and Advisory Council will meet in early June in Denver, Colorado.

### Glen Canyon Dam Adaptive Management Program

The Glen Canyon Dam Adaptive Management Work Group (AMWG) met March 6-7 in Phoenix, Arizona. The group discussed future funding for the program, which was thrown into uncertainty last year when the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) issued new guidance on the use of Colorado River Storage Project (CRSP) power revenues, which have provided the vast majority of program support since its inception. The program will likely be supported by appropriations in the future, which could affect the program's ability to maintain long-term monitoring projects and react quickly to monitor the effects of experimental dam releases.

The AMWG received a report on the initial results of 2018 experimental dam releases, including a fall High Flow Experiment (HFE) and summer 2018 "bug flows", steady weekend flows intended to increase the aquatic food base. The 2018 fall HFE appears to have been at least as effective at rebuilding eroded beaches as previous HFEs, despite being significantly shorter in duration. The bug flow releases also appear to have met their objectives, with reports of increased insect production in many areas of the river. These steady flows also seemed to have ancillary benefits, including greater angler catch rates and more favorable rafting conditions. The effect of bug flows on hydropower production was also less than anticipated, at a cost of around \$165,000 for the four-month experiment. The AMWG and Technical Work Group (TWG) will discuss experimental dam releases expected for 2019, which could include bug flows and an HFE, depending on conditions.

Representatives for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) reported on the proposed downlisting of two endangered fish found in the area: the humpback chub and the razorback sucker. Last fall, the USFWS signaled its intent to propose reclassifying these two fish from endangered to threatened. The official downlisting proposal for the humpback chub is expected to be published within the next two months, and the downlisting proposal for the razorback sucker is expected by fall 2019. Based on recent departmental guidance, the exact protections the species



will be afforded once they are reclassified as threatened will be determined within the downlisting proposals.

Finally, the TWG will meet March 12-14 in Phoenix for its Annual Reporting Meeting, at which researchers provide an overview of the past year's research and monitoring. The meeting was rescheduled after the government shutdown disrupted its initial February meeting date.

### Lower Colorado River Multi-Species Conservation Program

The Lower Colorado River Multi-Species Conservation Program (LCR MSCP) held a Financial Work Group call on February 21<sup>st</sup>. The group discussed the FY-18 budget, which was \$33.5 million. Actual expenditures came in about \$6 million below budget, largely due to delays in construction at new and existing conservation areas. The program proposes to shift this funding to the proposed FY-19 budget to accommodate these delays in construction, resulting in a FY-19 budget of \$38.4 million. The FY-20 budget is currently estimated to be approximately \$33.3 million. Finally, the LCR MSCP Steering Committee will meet April 24 in Las Vegas, Nevada.

## **GENERAL ANNOUNCEMENTS AND UPDATES**

### Washington, D.C. Updates

#### **Nominations**

Mr. Andrew Wheeler has been confirmed as the EPA Administrator. Administrator Wheeler was confirmed 52-47 with every Democrat and one Republican, Senator Susan Collins (R-ME), opposing his nomination. Senator Joe Manchin (D-WV) also opposed his confirmation, the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee Ranking Member, who previously supported Wheeler's appointment to be Deputy Administrator.

Earlier last month, President Trump nominated Mr. David Bernhardt, the current Acting Secretary of the Interior, to serve as the Secretary of the Interior. The White House has not yet submitted the requisite paperwork for his nomination, but it is expected that Mr. Bernhardt will be confirmed by the United States Senate, largely on a party-line basis, sometime over the next few months. The Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, which has jurisdiction over his confirmation, has yet to schedule a confirmation hearing on his behalf.

#### **Appropriations Fiscal Year 2020**

The President's FY-2020 budget was released on Monday, March 11<sup>th</sup>. A more detailed budget is expected the week of March 18<sup>th</sup>. Most Congressional offices continue to accept appropriations requests until two or three weeks after the President's budget is released. Thereafter,

Congress will officially begin holding subcommittee meetings and subsequently full committee meetings to get various spending bills through committee. It is still unclear how many legislative ‘minibus’ packages will be offered and how many will be passed. Last year, only three of the twelve appropriations bills were passed through regular order; one of them was the Energy and Water appropriations bill. Nonetheless, there is still ample opportunity to get various legislative priorities funded in Fiscal 2020.

### **Subcommittee Hearing on Water Supply**

Last week, the House Natural Resources Subcommittee on Water, Oceans, and Wildlife held a hearing about the state of the nation’s water supply and its reliability. This was the first subcommittee hearing chaired by new subcommittee chair Rep. Jared Huffman (D-CA-2), who frequently pushed back against former subcommittee chair Rep. Doug Lamborn (R-CO-5) for wanting more water storage without consideration for newer technologies. The hearing mostly focused on California water. Rep. Napolitano (D-CA-32) stated, "no silver bullet" to California's water woes, "I would like to suggest that we have to refocus on making water."

### **Future Hearings**

The Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee is expected to hold a DCP hearing on March 27<sup>th</sup>. This will be a smaller hearing and likely witnesses would be Commissioner Burman, a representative from the Upper Basin states and one from the Lower Basin states. It is also expected that the House Natural Resources Committee will schedule a DCP hearing on March 28<sup>th</sup>. This will likely be a larger hearing with representatives from all seven Basin States and Reclamation Commissioner Brenda Burman. The Committee may also invite an NGO witness to provide testimony as well.

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