



March 14, 2003

To Gale Norton Demanding Immediate Action on Colorado River Drought

Honorable Gale Norton
Secretary, United States Department of Interior
1849 C Street, NW
Washington DC, 20240

Dear Secretary Norton,

We are writing to seek your cooperation in averting the emerging social, economic and ecological crises related to Colorado River water availability. Although snow packs in the basin are improving, river flows are again predicted to be below normal for the fifth straight year. According to the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration, the current El Niño event has, "reached its mature stage and is expected to weaken." Basin-wide storage is at an all-time low. With federal water allocations continuing to exceed natural deliveries, the region is quickly nearing the halfway point to catastrophe. It is vital that federal, state, Indian tribes and private groups begin developing a framework for revisiting Colorado River water allocations and the laws which govern them.

We fully appreciate the political, economic and legal complexities associated with re-opening discussions pertaining to the Colorado River Compact and the Law of the River. However, the warning signs of system collapse are apparent. Storage in reservoirs is less than 60 percent of capacity and declining at a rate of more than ten percent per year. The Geological Survey cautioned last year that Western water managers should be prepared for below average precipitation over the next several decades. They caution that "a repeat of the 1942 to 1977 drought could be catastrophic" given the Colorado Basin's increased population growth.

If precautionary mechanisms are not put in place shortly, a crisis of unquantifiable proportions could easily unfold. Ten percent of the nation's population relies on Colorado River water, including the metropolitan areas of Los Angeles, Phoenix, Las Vegas, Salt Lake City, Albuquerque, San Diego and Denver. A \$1.5 billion agricultural industry and 4200 megawatts of the Southwest's energy supply could be severely impacted. Yet, Bureau of Reclamation Commissioner John Keys stated on February 13 that his agency has no plan for how to allocate water once major shortages occur.

Such complacency will not only burden the Southwest's economy, but the federal treasury and judiciary as well. Emergency funds will be sought to compensate irrigators who shift their water to municipal users. Major lawsuits will materialize as Western states and water users battle the federal government over control of water rights. Further compromises regarding in-stream flows will burden federal courts with additional environmental complaints. Unless timely, pro-active measures are taken, an extensive amount of federal, state and local resources will unnecessarily be poured into crisis management.

Such an atmosphere will exacerbate tensions amongst competing interests and further complicate efforts to establish realistic long-term Colorado River management strategies. Given the present allocation system, it is not a matter of if, but rather of when, the Colorado River storage system will be unable to meet demand. Scientists have determined that the actual average flow of the Colorado River at Lee's Ferry is 20 percent below the original Compact allocations. The data also reflects that the Colorado

River flow during the current drought cycle has been 15 percent lower than during the first four years of the 1942-1977 drought. Additional reservoirs will not solve the problem; new strategies for water allocation and use must be developed as soon as possible. We seek your commitment toward helping to establish a dialogue amongst the basin states, water users and environmental groups in order to begin tackling this critical problem.

The federal government has primacy over Colorado River management; you are the basin's legally designated Water Master. The Colorado River is held in trust for the benefit of the public, and it has become obvious that its management can no longer be relegated solely to the basin states. Uniform leadership, authority and policy development must come from the Department of the Interior. Your action at the end of last year to limit California and Nevada's deliveries to their prescribed allocations was a positive first step. We now encourage you to begin a thorough overhaul of the Colorado River Compact--one that realistically reflects present use patterns and anticipated river flows. At a minimum, water allocations need to be reduced to reflect actual historical river flows.

Bringing the basin's water use into balance with natural flows will be much easier, far more efficient and certainly less costly than the monumental engineering works of the past have been. In fact, as was calculated by the late Walter B. Langbein, the Colorado River Basin's reservoirs' evaporation and seepage losses far exceed the benefits of the additional water storage they provide.

In order for the Department of the Interior to realize a reduction in water allocation, a top priority should be the establishment of water use efficiency standards for all irrigators under contract with the Bureau of Reclamation. These users consume more than 80 percent of Colorado River water not destined for Mexico; programs should be established to aid irrigators in replacing water-intensive feed crops, such as alfalfa, with produce crops that use significantly less water per acre. Such measures could reduce irrigation consumption in the Colorado River Basin by half, thereby freeing up more water than is presently being used by all the municipalities currently plumbed into the Colorado River system.

The historical theory underlying Colorado River law and management is that in years of below-average river flow the sixty million acre-feet of storage built into the system will act as an insurance policy against the effects of cyclical drought. But we are becoming increasingly aware that such insurance is not limitless. Increasing water use within the basin and changing climatic conditions are driving the system to the breaking point. This need not occur. A vast amount of additional water management understanding and experience has been accumulated since the Colorado River Compact was first crafted. The Colorado River can accommodate the future needs of the Basin states, Indian tribes and Mexico as well as the natural environment. This important goal will most effectively be accomplished when the Department of the Interior takes the lead in the evolution of management policies which recognize the Colorado River's inevitable constraints.

Thank you for your attention to the matter, and we look forward to your reply.

Sincerely,

Owen T. Lammers
Executive Director

cc: John Keys, Commissioner, Bureau of Reclamation