

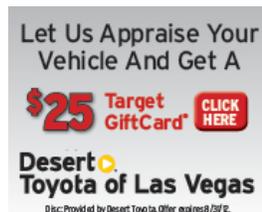
Las Vegas Sun

Where I Stand — Guest Column:

Stretching the Colorado River

Pat Mulroy

Sunday, Aug. 12, 2012 | 2:02 a.m.



In August, Brian Greenspun turns over his Where I Stand column to guest writers. Today's columnist is Pat Mulroy, general manager of the Southern Nevada Water Authority.

After last year's strong snowpack in the Rocky Mountains brought much-needed relief to a rapidly declining Lake Mead, there was optimism that perhaps the devastating drought that has plagued the Colorado River for the past decade was drawing to a close. Unfortunately, this year's record dry conditions — which have extended throughout much of the continental United States — have dashed those hopes. Just as we have seen through many periods of extended drought along the Colorado River, last year's bounty appears to have been little more than an apparition, disappearing more quickly than snow on the majestic mountain peaks of Colorado and Wyoming.

If climate scientists are correct, the West has many more such periods ahead. This new reality will fundamentally change the way we manage this crucial resource. This challenge will require a more selfless and fully engaged level of collaboration among communities and states than ever before.

I have often thanked the residents and businesses of Southern Nevada for your phenomenal efforts in reducing water use. Every year for the past decade, our per-person water consumption has decreased. However, last year we achieved a new milestone, reducing our per-capita consumptive use of water to 75 gallons per day among residents and only 133 gallons when all other community water uses are included. By effectively reusing virtually every drop of water used indoors, retrofitting much of our community's landscaping and adhering to sensible watering restrictions, Las Vegas and its surrounding cities have become a model of urban efficiency, demonstrating that water conservation does not have to come at the expense of our quality of life. Our neighbors in San Diego, Los Angeles, Phoenix, Denver and Albuquerque are on the same path, having recognized that managing their water wisely is fundamental to protecting their communities in the difficult times ahead.

Equally important is finding new strategies to manage the entire Colorado River. From its headwaters in Wyoming and Colorado, the river is diverted across the Continental Divide to users in Denver, Aurora and other cities of Colorado's Front Range, as well as vast agricultural tracts. As it reaches New Mexico, more water is moved to provide essential resources to Albuquerque. In Arizona and California, the river travels across hundreds of miles of desert to agricultural districts and thirsty cities. Even in Utah, which asserts that it doesn't believe in transferring water beyond its basin of origin, the Colorado River's flows are diverted to reach the growing cities of the Wasatch front, home to Salt Lake City. Ironically, while Las Vegas is the city closest to the Colorado River, Nevada receives only 1.8 percent of its allocated flows.

Although most people know that nearly 30 million westerners depend upon the river's flows, the Colorado plays an enormous role in agricultural production. One individual farming district in California accounts for more than 10 percent of the country's winter fruit and vegetables. The reality is that farms and countless acres of rangeland consume approximately 80 percent of the Colorado River while the combined cities account for only 20 percent, and these agricultural uses are crucial to both our economy and the stability of our nation's food supply.

As I write, the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation is finalizing a long-term supply and demand report that accounts for changing climatic conditions and projects the Colorado River's long-term balance. Based upon the interim reports, the news is not encouraging, and the consequences will fall to all water users — agricultural and urban. Everyone, from the tribal nations of the Upper Basin to environmental advocates in Mexico, has a stake in the outcome. As we work toward solutions, we must always consider the needs of every stakeholder and ensure that the burden is shared equitably.

There are countless opportunities to stretch the river's supplies for the benefit of all. Unfortunately, those opportunities quickly fade when two of the partners are before the U.S. Supreme Court, as appears to be the destiny for Nevada and Utah because Utah simply has ignored a congressional directive for the two states to agree on the equitable division of water resources in Snake Valley. When negotiated agreements are rendered a farce because they are simply discarded, it affects everyone in the basin. What happens in Los Angeles, Phoenix and Las Vegas affects Denver, Albuquerque and Salt Lake City.

The shortage-sharing agreement among the Colorado River Basin states in 2007 was a great first step; however, worsening conditions will make the next round of shortage discussions unavoidable. Protecting the communities of Southern Nevada in the face of such catastrophic events is the purpose of the project to develop renewable groundwater supplies within Nevada. We at the authority hope that the day is not upon us in the near term, but preserving the option for this community is imperative.

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