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Colorado Declared Most Endangered River in the U.S.

Long Term Solutions, Not a Bank-breaking Pipeline Are Needed to Supply Las Vegas Water

LAS VEGAS, Nev. — American Rivers organization today announced its annual list of America's Most Endangered Rivers®, naming the Colorado River the Most Endangered River in the country. The Colorado River is endangered by outdated water management that is inadequate to respond to the pressures of over-allocation and persistent drought.

"The River is severely over allocated under a series of out-dated laws and agreements commonly known as the "Law of the River", stated Abby Johnson, Chair of the Great Basin Water Network. "Past allocations were based on flows during an unusually high flow period, and according to a recent Bureau of Reclamation report are inadequate to meet today's demands let alone future demands from unsustainable growth and agriculture."

Nevada's share of the River – 300,000 acre feet annually is currently sufficient to meet the local demands, however it will not hold up under a repeat of the uncontrolled, rampant growth experienced between 1990 and 2007.

The SNWA is currently proposing to construct a 200+ mile pipeline that would carry up to 84,000 acre feet of ground water from central Nevada to Las Vegas at a cost of over $15.5 billion. Alternatives to the pipeline were not vetted in the federal environmental impact statement process, nor have they been presented to the residents and rate payers of Southern Nevada by the SNWA, or its Board.

"Responses to the declining condition of the Colorado River cannot include draining ancient aquifers in Nevada and Utah of their limited waters to quench unsustainable growth in Las Vegas", said Steve Erickson, a Salt Lake City board member. "These waters are crucial to the livelihoods and health of rural communities and families, as well as to the future of the Great Basin ecosystems and natural heritage in Nevada and Utah. Governor Herbert's refusal to be buffaloed by the SNWA into a devastating agreement over waters in Snake Valley highlighted the need for taking a big-picture look and not falling for short lived solutions".

Often forgotten is the science-based fact that the ground water the SNWA wants to pump flows into the Colorado River, so their pumping would diminish this source of water for the River.

“There is a reasoned approach that will result in a sustainable and viable, livable Las Vegas Valley while protecting the Colorado River and the natural heritage of Nevada and Utah” says Rob Mrowka, Great Basin Water Network board member. It consists of four steps:

“First, local elected officials and chieftains of development must agree to live within the current development footprint of the Valley and not agree to any further expansion of the Congressionally set “disposal boundary”. This will allow for needed in-fill development and reasoned growth.”

“Second, there must be real and meaningful increases in conservation and water-use efficiency in the Las Vegas Valley. The drought ordinances originally passed in the early 2000s must be re-instituted, efforts to remove turf increased, and new ordinances put in place requiring water smart fixtures and landscaping for every new home. The daily scene of wasted water flowing down streets in every part of the Valley can no longer be tolerated, nor can the SNWA’s lack of effective response to it.”

” Third, Nevada elected officials must join with their counterparts in the Colorado River Basin to call upon and assist the federal government in re-writing the Law of the River to reflect modern needs and the sobering fact that climate change will decrease flows in the River by 10-30% as soon as 2050. A serious and difficult look at the ability of the Colorado River Basin to absorb additional growth is required as well as the continued use of 76% of the flows for non-critical agriculture or wasteful irrigation practices.”

“Finally, planning must begin now for the development of desalinization facilities in California and Mexico to supplement the water supplied by the Colorado River. While desalinization carries with it its own set of environmental and technical problems, getting an early start on developing the solutions will result in the only viable long term option for meeting the water needs of California and the Southwest”, Mrowka concluded.

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