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THE ENVIRONMENT:

Trump, Western storms cast uncertainty on Colorado River

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The situation last summer was as clear to accept as it was sobering. Prolonged drought had strained an already overallocated Colorado River, and nowhere was this more visible than at the reservoirs along the river. Behind the Hoover Dam, surface levels at Lake Mead, from which Las Vegas draws most of its water, dropped to a low not seen since the lake was filled in 1935. Water managers said states likely would face cuts to their supplies.

As this threat swelled last year, the states that pull municipal and agricultural water from the lake — Arizona, California and Nevada — started negotiating a Drought Contingency Plan. Under the agreement, which was supported by the Obama administration, the states would voluntarily reduce Lake Mead intake during times of drought to prevent more severe mandatory cuts. The plan would provide the states, especially Arizona, with more flexibility to plan for less water.

At the same time last year, the Obama administration and state water managers were pushing for an accord with Mexico that would make it easier to share water during shortages. A draft agreement was finalized and negotiators rushed to complete it before the inauguration of President Donald Trump, who had pledged to alter the U.S.-Mexico relationship by renegotiating NAFTA and building a wall between the two nations.

Months later, neither agreement has been completed, although state water managers remain confident they will proceed, citing recent progress and stressing the need for more tools to manage a waterway that supports 40 million people across the Southwest and Mexico. Some are concerned about how quickly the deals will progress, citing shifts in hydrology and the political climate.

The binational talks

In early March, Western water officials wrote a letter to Department of the Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke, pressing the Trump administration to provide leadership in sealing the two deals.

“The Basin states urge you to support the completion and execution of (the U.S.-Mexico deal),” wrote negotiators for Arizona, California, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, Utah and Wyoming.

The Trump administration has made no official statements on the Mexico agreement. It is still staffing out the Bureau of Reclamation, the Interior Department agency that manages the river. But since sending the letter March 8, state-level negotiators have received some assurances that Mexico appears willing to agree to the accord, as it was finalized toward the end of 2016.

“We’re still not 100 percent sure where everyone in the Trump administration is on this,” said Tom Buschatzke, who directs the Arizona Department of Water Resources and signed the letter to Secretary Zinke. “But the staff-level people who worked on this with us are still there.”

Yet increasingly antagonistic U.S.-Mexico foreign policy concerns some observers of the Colorado River, including water users, environmentalists and conservationists.

In a report last month, the Congressional Research Service wrote that any new deals “are likely to be influenced by the general character of the relationship between the two countries in 2017.”

“Everybody looking at the river that I’ve talked to is concerned about the current diplomatic relationship,” said Stephen Mumme, a professor of environmental politics at Colorado State.

Mexico splits Colorado River water with Western U.S. states under a 1944 treaty. The deal under negotiation, known as Minute 32x, amends the treaty with a pathway for conservation and water-sharing during shortages. It would replace a similar agreement that expires this year.

Under the accord, Mexico would bank water in Lake Mead, helping stave off shortages by keeping elevations high. In return, it would receive U.S. funding for conservation projects.

“Anything that builds storage in Lake Mead is a good thing for all of us — both Mexico and the United States,” said Chris Harris, executive director of California’s Colorado River Board.

Mumme said the Trump administration would be foolish to turn its back on a deal that could avoid a future conflict between the two countries over water shortages. “Mexico has a treaty right,” he said. “This is an area where the Trump administration has no room for maneuver if it’s uncooperative. There is every incentive to want to consolidate the diplomatic gains.”

An Interior Department spokesman said in a statement that it is “hopeful that a new agreement can be reached this year.”

The domestic agreement

Two days before Trump’s inauguration, outgoing Interior Secretary Sally Jewell told the agency, soon to have new political appointees, to continue working with states on the Drought Contingency Plan. If successful, the agreement — between Arizona, California and Nevada — would slow Lake Mead’s dropping elevations through conservation and water storage.

During shortages, the states would voluntarily cut their lake intake. Arizona would accept the steepest cuts and California would only start cutting when the lake dropped to severely low elevations.

“We are sort of on a hiatus,” Harris said of that plan, which must gain the support of municipal and agricultural water users in all three states before it gets federal approval.

If the political climate could endanger the binational agreement, the physical climate could slow the Drought Contingency Plan. The Colorado River’s hydrology has changed in recent months; winter storms have replenished Rocky Mountain snowpack, the Colorado River’s lifeblood.

In an article for the Arizona Daily Star, officials from the Central Arizona Project, which distributes much of the state’s water, have suggested reviewing conservation efforts in light of the improved hydrology. In an interview with The Sunday, CAP Director of Water Policy Suzanne Ticknor said CAP supports the plan and that “good hydrology has given us a reprieve but not a solution.”

State officials insist on moving ahead with the plan. “One good year is not going to solve our problem,” said Buschatzke, Arizona’s top water official.

But it remains complicated because of issues internal to each state. In California, for instance, there had been some hesitance to move ahead before the state had finalized a separate proposal to mitigate dust at the shrinking Salton Sea, a problem that could be intensified by river cuts. In late March, the state unveiled its Salton Sea plan, which could alleviate some of that resistance.

State negotiators still agree on the importance of the Drought Contingency Plan and speak multiple times per month. Bronson Mack, a spokesman for the Southern Nevada Water Authority, said Nevada still supports the drought plan, despite the winter snowstorms.

“We feel comfortable with the framework in place,” he said.