

1-1-2012

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Joseph Norris

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Joseph Norris, Conference Report, The Operation Guidelines for Equalization of Lakes Powell and Mead, 15 U. Denv. Water L. Rev. 501 (2012).

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The Operation Guidelines for Equalization of Lakes Powell and Mead

CONFERENCE REPORTS

THE FIFTY-FOURTH ANNUAL CONVENTION OF THE COLORADO WATER CONGRESS: THE YEAR OF WATER CELEBRATION OUR STORIES. OUR WORK. OUR VISION.

Denver, Colorado

January 25-27, 2012

THE OPERATION GUIDELINES FOR EQUALIZATION OF LAKES POWELL AND MEAD

Terry Fulp, Deputy Regional Director of the Lower Colorado Region of the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, addressed the Colorado Water Congress 2012 Annual Convention on the operation and management of Lakes Powell and Mead. Due to one of the worst drought cycles in more than a century, in 2005 the Secretary of the Interior initiated the two-year process of updating the guidelines for operating the main water storage reservoirs on the Colorado River system. In 2009, the Secretary adopted the Colorado River Interim Guidelines for the Lower Basin Shortages and the Coordinated Operations for Lake Powell and Lake Mead (“Guidelines”) in order to address water-shortage conditions. Fulp explained that the Guidelines provide a framework for operation of the lakes and allow the Reclamation to equalize the contents of Lake Powell and Lake Mead.

Fulp began by explaining the statutory framework of the Colorado River Basin and the complex history leading to present day conditions. Fulp noted that some are calling for a new legal framework instead of the outdated patchwork of treaties and compacts; however according to Fulp, the best way to manage a water system is to work collaboratively with all parties involved.

Lake Powell is located above Lee’s Ferry in northern Arizona and provides the primary storage capacity for the Upper Basin States that are party to the Colorado River Compact. Storage in Lake Powell allows the Upper Basin States to meet Compact flow requirements to the Lower Basin States and Mexico in years of drought. Lake Mead is similarly the primary storage structure for the Lower Basin States located on the Arizona-Nevada border. To impart perspective, Fulp explained that the storage capacity on the Colorado River system is about four times the amount of average annual inflow. Yet despite the massive amount of water storage, Fulp noted that there is a shortage of history of the management of the two reservoirs. Because Lake Powell opened in 1964, the forty-eight years of history of management of the two reservoirs together only encompasses a small portion of the hydrologic cycle and does not account for all types of variability in weather patterns.

Because the early operation of the two lakes was during high flows, the sustained drought in the early 2000's forced then-Secretary Gail Norton to make a decision. At the time, Lake Powell was releasing water very quickly to meet discharge requirements downstream, and water levels dropped rapidly. Fulp explained that Secretary Norton tasked the Bureau of Reclamation with coming up with guidelines to equalize the two lakes in the event of drought with a deadline of December 2007. The Bureau underwent a NEPA evaluation of the different options for the plan and the final guidelines selected covered the full range of operations in high and low flow conditions. Fulp explained that the resulting 2007 Guidelines encourage efficient and flexible use of Colorado River water and provide a strategy for shortages in the Lower Basin. Fulp stressed another key component of the Guidelines: all Basin States agreed to consult each other before resorting to litigation.

Next, Fulp described the specific tiered structure based on specified water elevation levels for operating Lake Powell and Lake Mead. The Guidelines allow the Secretary to declare shortage, normal, or surplus conditions for the Lower Basin. Fulp explained that because Lake Mead is more demand-driven and Lake Powell is more supply-driven, each of the two lakes has different stakeholders and different needs. While the goal is not to be in complete equalization, the Guidelines allow the Bureau to balance the two lakes in a more efficient manner. For more detailed views of the Operational Diagrams and the full Guidelines text, visit <http://www.usbr.gov/lc/region/programs/strategies/documents.html>.

Malcolm Wilson, Chief of the Water Resources Group of the Upper Colorado Region of the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, spoke more specifically about the operation and management of flows in the system. The Bureau sets operational tiers for each of the lakes in its Annual Operating Plan based on current conditions and projected hydrologic conditions. Wilson explained that the Bureau refines its operations monthly to meet these tiered objectives. Luckily, to date, neither Lake Mead nor Lake Powell operated under any shortage conditions. In fact Lake Mead operated under the ICS Surplus Condition each of the initial four years of operation under the Guidelines.

The Intentionally Created Surplus ("ICS") program is another aspect of the Guidelines that allow for more flexibility in water management in the lower basin. When Lake Mead is in an ICS tier, water users can use the ICS program to conserve water in a variety of ways to receive credits for that water use in the future. ICS options include fallowing programs, delivery system improvements, and system efficiency, to name a few. However, Fulp noted that there are limits to the ICS program. Fulp clarified that ICS credits are limited to roughly 2.1 million acre feet for all users. In addition, water users cannot use ICS credits during shortage conditions because it would only serve to exacerbate drought conditions on the Colorado River.

The Guidelines governing the operations of Lake Mead and Lake Powell will remain in effect through 2026. To find more information on the Guidelines or the Bureau of Reclamation visit the Upper Colorado

Region (<http://www.usbr.gov/uc/region>) and Lower Colorado Region (<http://www.usbr.gov/lc/region>) webpages.

Joseph Norris

CHARTING NEW WATERS: REPORT ON THE COLORADO REGIONAL FRESHWATER FORUM

Lynn Broaddus, Director of the Environment Program at The Johnson Foundation at Wingspread, provided an update on the outcomes of the Charting New Waters Colorado Regional Freshwater Forum. The Johnson Foundation at Wingspread ("Foundation") held the meeting on October 18, 2011 at the Denver Botanic Gardens. Nearly one hundred water stakeholders attended to discuss the State's experience in dealing with several freshwater-specific challenges, including balancing the different needs for water, enhancing water conservation, and the water-energy nexus.

The Colorado Regional Forum was one of a number of similar meetings around the country presenting the Foundation's findings over the last three years. The Foundation initially presented their report, *Charting New Waters: A Call to Action to Address U.S. Freshwater Challenges*, on September 15, 2012 in Washington, D.C. The Foundation's goal is to bring stakeholders from across the country together to achieve a more comprehensive approach to freshwater management. Broaddus explained that the Regional Forums allow local stakeholders to have a more prominent voice at the national policy-making level. The Foundation's message also includes allowing different regions of the country to learn from one another in water management.

Broaddus noted that the Foundation is not attempting to tell Colorado water managers what to do, but is rather attempting to have meetings that are different from the status quo. The focus of the meetings is to foster collaboration and truly bring all types of players to the table to discuss freshwater issues.

Broaddus explained that the Foundation chose Colorado for one of the Regional Forums because of its issues in water supply that are unique from other parts of the country. While the rest of the country focuses primarily on water quality issues, Colorado and the Rocky Mountain region must also consider water availability under the prior appropriation doctrine. Both upcoming Forums will focus on topics related to specific regional issues. The Seattle Regional Forum will focus more on Clean Water Act issues and the balance between uses of stormwater and freshwater. In contrast, the Boston Regional Forum will consider what urban water infrastructure looks like in the future.

Finally, Broaddus discussed some of the themes that came out of the Colorado Regional Forum. Forum attendees discussed mutually beneficial alternatives to traditional agricultural transfers of water that promote triple-bottom line benefits (revenue, quality of life, and environmental protection). Broaddus also explained some of the discussion on the wa-