

# Busting myths about water shortage

By Anne Castle 4 p.m. Sept. 26, 2013

The Colorado River Basin has a problem: the ongoing drought that began in 2000 is one of the worst in a thousand years. While demand for water continues to grow, climate change is causing supplies to dwindle. We need to take aggressive steps now toward solving this imbalance and protecting the vibrant economy of the Southwest.

The right resources are being brought to bear. The Bureau of Reclamation's Colorado River Basin Study, released last December, established the scientific foundation for hard thinking about how to balance our continued growth with limited and volatile supplies. The study has accelerated with discussions already underway among the Department of the Interior; the seven Colorado River Basin states; major water providers and Native American tribes reliant on Colorado River water; and environmental, recreational, and business interests.

In order to have a productive discussion about our water future, we must shoot down some stubborn myths about the solutions to water shortages:

**Myth 1 — The silver bullet.** It would be great if we could take a single, easy step to eliminate the projected gap between supply and demand. Unfortunately, that one definitive action does not exist. Our response must involve multiple sectors of the economy so that no one region or type of water use bears a disproportionate share of the load. No silver bullet will solve this problem — it will take multiple, incremental efforts.

**Myth 2 — Cities just need to stop wasting water.** Cities in the Southwest are models for the nation in their efforts to conserve water. Outside restrictions on water use are part of our Western landscape, and educating the public about water use in arid areas has garnered good results. Yet, the myth persists that we'd have plenty of water to go around if we stop watering golf courses in Phoenix or bluegrass in Denver or abolish fountains in Las Vegas or swimming pools in L.A. But the projected shortfall between supply and demand dwarfs any realistic estimate for additional conservation. Cities should and will do more, but this will be only one piece of the puzzle, not the entire fix.

**Myth 3 — Water is too valuable to use on farms.** Although about 80 percent of Colorado River water goes to agriculture, we would be unwise to assume that we can address shortages solely by removing irrigation water from farms. Retiring too much farmland will harm our economy in the Southwest, our food security and our quality of life. Further improving efficiency, judicious switching to less-thirsty crops, and using science to grow more with less water will be essential, but we must be careful not to destabilize rural economies that are the foundation of the basin.

Myth 4 — The states can make this shortage go away. The seven Colorado River Basin states are the first responders in addressing drought, but they can't do it alone. Interior has an integral role in any solution, given its unique interests and assets, not the least of which is its ownership of the major mainstem reservoirs. The 29 Indian tribes along the Colorado River have substantial interests and senior priorities for its water. Our partner in Mexico is joined with us by treaty and shared concern about the wise use of the river and the potential for revitalizing the delta connection to the Sea of Cortez. We must all work together to craft and implement solutions for sustainable use of the river.

Myth 5 — When times are tough, we can sacrifice in stream flows. Environmental and recreation flows aren't just nice things to have; they're essential drivers for the economy of the Southwest. Recent analyses and surveys have demonstrated that a flowing river floats hundreds of millions of dollars into the economy. Business interests up and down the river are increasingly and appropriately vocal about their stake in healthy flows. Maintaining beautiful waterways that support tourism, recreation, and ecosystems in and adjacent to the river is a necessary component of any solution.

Creating a sustainable future for the Colorado River Basin will require serious discussions about how to adjust and balance the many interests that rely on this precious resource. The continued prosperity of the Southwest rests on our collective ability to see through the myths and work together to meet the challenges ahead.

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