

# **Is It Time for a Nevada Water Future Discussion and Strategy?**

By

Central Nevada Regional Water Authority

April 15, 2014

## **BACKGROUND**

On May 2, 2003 the U.S. Department of Interior released a report entitled “Water 2015: Preventing Crises and Conflict in the West.” The report states “Today, in some areas of the West, existing water supplies are, or will be, inadequate to meet the demands of the people, cities, farms, and the environment even under normal water supply conditions.” The report says five interrelated realities of water management are creating crises in the West: 1) explosive population growth, 2) water shortages exist, 3) water shortages result in conflict, 4) aging water facilities limit options, and 5) crisis management is not effective.” Today, it appears a sixth interrelated reality is extended drought and climate change.

Over the last few years many articles have been written about the existing and/or impending water supply crisis in the West. The titles of a few of these articles are: 1) “Warning: Water policy faces an age of limits,” 2) “Growth top threat to water supply,” 3) “Dramatic water changes coming to the Southwest,” 4) “Study: Climate Change May Dry Up Important U.S. Reservoirs Like Lake Powell and Lake Mead,” 5) “Where Will All the Water Come From?,” 6) “Worst Drought in 1,000 Years Could Begin in Eight Years,” and 7) “A new report confirms what we should already know: The Colorado River is in deep trouble.”

The new report that confirms the Colorado River is in deep trouble is the December 2012 U.S. Bureau of Reclamation report entitled “Colorado River Basin Water Supply and Demand Study.” The Study’s primary finding is there are likely to be significant shortfalls between projected Colorado River water supplies and demands in the coming years. The median shortfall is projected to be 3.2 million acre-feet per year by 2060, and the worst case shortfall is projected to be close to 8 million acre-feet per year by 2060. To put this in perspective, consider the fact that the average Colorado River flow of late has been approximately 15 million acre-feet per year, and the Law of the River allocates 17 million acre-feet of Colorado River water to seven Colorado River Basin states and other parties (including Mexico).

At the December 2013 Colorado River Water Users Association conference in Las Vegas the Secretary of Interior, Sally Jewell, said decreasing Colorado River water supplies is the “new normal on the river that we all had to deal with.”

If Secretary Jewell’s statement and the Bureau of Reclamation’s report are accurate, or even close to accurate, then Las Vegas Valley is facing a water supply dilemma. Las Vegas Valley receives 90 percent of its water supply from the Colorado River, and it appears there may be significant curtailments in Colorado River water to the Valley in the years to come. In addition, Nevada’s traditional in-state sources of water – surface water and groundwater – are at best limited, and at worst diminishing. Also, it is clearly expensive, controversial and risky for a Nevada urban area to stake its future on water from rural Nevada.

The Central Nevada Regional Water Authority feels Nevada is facing a water supply crisis. In fact, since 2008 the Authority has asked the Nevada Legislature to consider Nevada’s limited and possible diminishing water supply a critical issue for Nevada’s economic well-being, valued quality of life and natural environment. In the 2013 Nevada Legislative Session the Authority asked the Legislature, via Assembly Bill 301, to have the Legislative Committee on Public Lands conduct a study on water supply for Nevada communities during the next interim (2014). The Authority testified that Nevada is the most arid state in the union, and the Colorado River Basin and the Great Basin have experienced severe drought over the last decade. For example, 2000 to 2013 was the driest 14-year period in the 100-year historical record for the Colorado River Basin. Also, some scientists believe the Sierra Nevada snowpack that is the basis for western Nevada’s water supply could decrease as much as 40 percent by 2050. The Authority’s AB301 testimony included a statement that there is no question that a number of Nevada communities do not have an identified, sustainable water supply within their control to accommodate projected population growth over the next 30 years. The Authority asked that the AB301 study focus on alternative sources of water for Nevada communities since Nevada’s surface water resources are scarce and fully appropriated, and its groundwater resources are scarce, uncertain and fully appropriated in many areas. Alternative sources of water include water conservation, water recycling, desalination, conjunctive use and rain water capture. AB301 passed the Assembly by unanimous vote of approval, but it was not voted on by the Senate.

As would be expected, the States of Utah, Colorado and California are also confronted with projected water supply shortfalls in the near future. These states are actively addressing the problem by way of programs focused on ensuring a secure water future. The State of California's program is called "California Water Action Plan," and a draft was released in late 2013. The State of Colorado's program is called "Colorado's Water Plan," and the first draft of the plan was also released in late 2013. The State of Utah's program is called "Utah's Water Future – Developing a 50-Year Water Strategy for Utah." Utah Governor Gary Herbert initiated the program in the spring of 2013. He said "We are at a crossroads for our future here," and he cited the challenges of ensuring adequate water supplies in the face of demand brought by population growth, the outdoor economy and environmental concerns. In July and August of 2013 the Utah water future program had eight listening sessions, held across the state, to begin mapping out a water strategy for the future. In addition to public comments at the listening sessions, the State of Utah received more than 800 online comments during the summer. On October 30, 2013 Governor Herbert convened a water summit to review what the public said about Utah's water future and announce the next steps in the process to develop the 50-year water strategy. At the water summit Governor Herbert announced the creation of a 38-member Utah Water Strategy Advisory Team to help develop the 50-year water strategy.

At the December 13, 2013 Central Nevada Regional Water Authority meeting the Authority received a presentation from Steve Erickson, a member of the Utah Water Strategy Advisory Team. He said the Team will solicit and evaluate potential water management strategies, frame water management options for public feedback, and develop a set of recommended strategies to be considered by the State of Utah as part of the 50-year water strategy. Mr. Erickson said the critical component of the Utah water future program has been the effort by Governor Herbert to involve the public in the program, and the tremendous response by the public to participate in the program.

### RECOMMENDATION

The question that begs an answer is what can be done to avoid a Nevada water supply crisis stemming from population growth, limited in-state water resources, drought and climate change? Ensuring a secure water future for the State of Nevada has to be a top priority for the State, the Nevada Legislature and Nevada's

local governments. The Authority feels the State of Nevada, the Nevada Legislature, Nevada's local governments, the business community, the environmental community and the public should come together in a partnership to develop a meaningful statewide water supply strategy.

At the December 13, 2013 Central Nevada Regional Water Authority meeting the Authority asked its executive director to look into the development of a Nevada water future program similar to the Utah water future program. In early 2014 the Authority's executive director discussed the concept of a Nevada water future program with the directors of eight Nevada water entities and asked them if they would be amenable to attending a meeting to discuss the merits of a Nevada water future program. The response was yes. The Authority feels if there is support from Nevada water entities for a Nevada water future program then the next step would be to have a water summit in the summer of 2014, say August, to 1) receive a presentation from the State of Utah on its water future program, 2) receive presentations from water resource research organizations (e.g., Bureau of Reclamation, USGS, Natural Resources Conservation Service, etc.) on water supply challenges facing Nevada, and 3) discuss whether or not to have a Nevada water future program, and if there is support for the program, develop a program outline. For example, a Nevada water future program could include the following steps: 1) initial discussion of Nevada's water future and a Nevada water future program at a water future summit, 2) listening sessions throughout the state to discuss Nevada's water future and potential water management strategies, and 3) the development of a Nevada water future strategy by a water strategy advisory team for consideration by the State of Nevada, the Nevada Legislature and Nevada's local governments.

#### CLOSING COMMENT

The answer to the title of this paper is yes; that is, it is time for a Nevada water future discussion and strategy. One should keep in mind the old Chinese proverb: "If we are not careful we will end up where we are going." Also, it has been said one should not waste a crisis since it presents an opportunity to do good.