

Planned flood in Grand Canyon OK'd

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GRAND CANYON NATIONAL PARK — Regardless of spring runoff this year, expect big spring floods in the Grand Canyon.

Secretary of Interior Bruce Babbitt signed a memo last week clearing the way for jet tubes at Glen Canyon Dam to release large volumes of water between March 22 and April 7, reproducing the kind of high-water flows that used to occur most springs along the Colorado River.

"We're set to go," U.S. Bureau of Reclamation spokesman Barry Wirth said Friday. "It will be a historic moment."

Such floods over the centuries shaped Glen Canyon and the Grand Canyon and all of the flora and fauna living along the Colorado River. But spring floods have been absent since the early 1960s, when the Glen Canyon Dam was built along the

Utah-Arizona border.

The dam trapped the big flows in Lake Powell, then released the water in measured volumes designed to maximize the generation of electricity for large parts of the West.

But on the weekend of March 22, the bureau will oversee a long-awaited experiment to see what environmental effects result from high-water flows that mimic the natural water cycle.

Scientists expect the flood flows to restore beaches and other habitat that have disappeared because of the controlled-flow regime. That may disrupt non-native fish-life cycles and rejuvenate backwater habitat important to endangered fishes such as the humpback chub, Wirth said.

Babbitt gave his approval predicated on a U.S. Fish and Wildlife-approved environmental opinion that said the planned

flooding would not affect three protected or endangered species: the humpback chub, the Kanab ambersnail and the southwestern willow flycatcher.

During the weekend of March 22, Wirth said, releases from Glen Canyon Dam will be increased to a steady rate of 8,000 cubic feet per second.

That level will be maintained for four days, so researchers can photograph the environment and do surveys before the flood.

On March 26, flows will be increased by opening the jet tubes, large pipes that direct water around the dam's power turbines and blast it into the river.

About midday on March 27, flows will reach 45,000 cubic feet per second. That flood stage will be held for seven days. Starting April 2, the rate of releases will be decreased to 8,000 cubic feet per second.