

Water level at Lake Mead becc

The Bureau of Reclamation, Lower Colorado Region, has responded to a series of questions concerning the status of Lake Mead and its water resource.

Of primary concern, perhaps, is the projected outlook of a dwindling water resource and a steadily declining Lake Mead.

According to V. LeGrand Neilson, regional supervisor of water, land and power, the outlook for the next five years is that there is about a 65 percent probability Lake Mead will be near or above its current level in March 1997.

That estimate is based on the 85 years of recorded runoff, and the chance of refilling is about 40 percent.

"There is also a slight chance that drought could continue for several more years with the lake being drawn down substantially lower than it is now," Neilson said. "Future



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weather, of course, is the greatest uncertainty in our projections."

Neilson also revealed where Lake Mead water is going.

"Last year Nevada used about 182,000 acre-feet," he said. "The Colorado River Commission of Nevada projects that full use of Nevada's 300,000 acre-feet could be reached by the year 2005. As allowed by a 1964 Supreme Court decree (Arizona vs. California), the unused portion of Nevada's share (and also of Arizona's share) has been used by California.

"As Nevada and Arizona ap-

proach full use of their shares, California's use of Colorado River water will be reduced correspondingly. The main effect that Nevada's full use of its share will have on Hoover Dam is that the presently unused portion which is now diverted to California from Lake Havasu will instead be pumped out of Lake Mead, resulting in slightly reduced energy generation at Hoover and Davis dams."

The yearly demand on Lake Mead includes about 7.5 million acre-feet (maf) for uses in the United States, and 1.5 maf for Mexico and about 1.2 maf of evaporation from Lake Mead and downstream reservoirs and for river regulation. The runoff of the Colorado River for the last five years is the lowest five-year period of record since 1906, reports Neilson.

Concerns also have been raised by the public regarding the ability of Hoover Dam to produce power should water levels decline to severe

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levels.

"The minimum power pool for Lake Mead and the Hoover power plant is generally applied at elevation 1,083, or about 95 feet below the current level of the lake," Neilson said. "While the power plant can be operated at lake levels even lower than this, the capacity and efficiency are reduced.

"Since Lake Mead was first filled in 1941, its level has fallen below elevation 1,090 on only two occasions — in the spring of 1956 and the winter of 1964-65. The second of those two occasions was related to the filling of Lake Powell upstream. It is improbable that the current drought will last long enough for the lake to be drawn down that far again."

Neilson also commented on the proposal to study the capturing of some of the Virgin River flows before they enter Lake Mead. If this should be done, Neilson indicated

70,000 acre-feet per year would not be charged against Nevada's apportionment of Colorado River water, and this action would increase the decline in Lake Mead by about 6 inches per year.

Finally, Neilson has words of caution for the public.

"Because the Lower Division States' annual water apportionment of 7.5 maf is now essentially fully used, conservation will become increasingly important, and Southern Nevada will possibly need additional sources of water," he said.