

# Lower Colorado River drying up from overuse, study finds

**Associated Press**

SAN FRANCISCO — Almost 30 million acre feet of water once flowed into the Colorado River delta, supporting native fish, fowl and Indian tribes, as well as the fisheries beyond in the Gulf of California.

But now, not a single drop of fresh water reaches the delta most years — and the situation will only worsen as seven states and Mexico use up their legal allocations, says a study released Friday.

“More water has been promised in the future than the river can deliver,” said Sandra Postel of the Global Water Policy Project, one of the authors. “We haven’t hit the real crunch yet, but it’s coming very soon.”

California has used more than its legal allocation of Colorado River water in three of the last eight years. Nevada estimates it will reach its limit in a decade.

Arizona once projected it wouldn’t need its full allocation until 2025 or 2030. But problems with the state’s central water project could force growers to use up the river allocation much sooner, says Jason Morrison of the Pacific Institute, the study’s principal author.

Seventy-five years ago, the

lower Colorado was so rich in wildlife naturalist Aldo Leopold called it “a milk and honey wilderness.”

During a 1922 canoe trip down the river he described deer, quail, racoons, bobcats and flocks of water fowl wading in green lagoons.

“But now it’s salt flats and desiccated landscapes,” Postel said. The lack of fresh water entering the lower river has allowed salt water from the Gulf of California to flow into the river bed.

Some species of fish that once thrived in the river, including the big 6-foot steel-blue totoaba, are close to extinction. Catches in the Gulf of California are also dropping.

Animals and plant life are not the only losers.

For 2,000 years the river supported up to 5,000 Cocopa Indians on the Mexican side of the current border.

“Now their numbers have dwindled down to 40 or 50 families,” Postel said. “Their basic way of life — fishing and farming — is no longer viable. There’s basically no clean water running past. It has to be trucked in.”

Scientists aren’t certain how much water would be needed to

restore a natural ecosystem to the delta region.

But achieving a token 500,000 acre feet annually through the delta — only 1 or 2 percent of the original flow — “is doable,” Postel said.

Agriculture accounts for 80 to 85 percent of the Colorado River use, and much of the water is wasted in the high-evaporation regions of Arizona and California’s Imperial Valley, she said. If growers would switch to more efficient sprinklers or drip irrigation, they could reduce usage.

And switching from water-hungry crops such as cotton and alfalfa in favor of vegetables and citrus would help as well, reducing water use by 30 to 35 percent overall, she said.

But none of the solutions will save the lower river unless the Colorado River states — Wyoming, Colorado, Utah, Nevada, New Mexico, Arizona and California, as well as the U.S. and Mexican governments, work together on a solution.

To achieve that, Morrison said, the federal government must take the initiative, as the Interior Department did when it experimented with increasing the river flow through the Grand Canyon.