



CONSERVATION

Dams and the Colorado

by John Ludwigson

Despite the Interior Department's recent apparent capitulation to conservationists on building two dams in the Grand Canyon, no end to the Colorado River controversy is yet in sight.

In fact, the revised lower Colorado development program now being proposed by Interior Secretary Stewart L. Udall is simply a stripped-down version of last year's proposals.

Last year, the Department of the Interior, and a coterie of southwestern legislators, assembled a crazy-quilt of political compromise in an effort to channel Colorado River water into central Arizona.

The proposal depended on importation of Columbia River water to augment the overtaxed Colorado and on revenues from two power dams in the Grand Canyon. When these were shot down, the whole project collapsed.

Now, by leaving out the Grand Canyon dams, the Secretary hopes to mollify the conservationists; by dropping recommendation of a water importation study, he apparently hopes to get Pacific Northwest legislators off his back; and by shuffling these and a variety of other sub-issues into the lap of Congress he must be hoping to avoid charges that he is scuttling the carefully laid out Colorado River Basin Plan.

Interior's new proposal calls for immediate construction of the Central Arizona Project, a scheme to pump 1.2 million acre-feet of water a year from the Colorado for the Phoenix and Tucson area. It recommends establishment of a National Water Commission.

One dam site, at Marble Canyon upstream from Grand Canyon National Park, would become part of a greatly expanded park, thus insuring that no dam would ever be built there.

The question of whether or not to build the other dam, Bridge Canyon or Hualapai Dam downstream from the park, Secretary Udall would now like to leave entirely up to Congress.

Apparently, as he pointed out in a press briefing, "The Central Arizona Project doesn't need a dam."

Though apparently a concession to conservation groups such as the Sierra Club, the decision not to recommend the dams means simply that Secretary Udall has tossed the hot potatoes to Congress where they would have had to be approved anyway.

And there is always the chance that the Federal Power Commission might license a private firm or association to build one of the dams. The Arizona Power Authority and the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power have already sought such a license to build

Marble Canyon Dam, though Mr. Udall has asked that the decision be deferred.

The Sierra Club has also petitioned the FPC to postpone any such action until Congress can consider legislation on the lower Colorado.

But all the debate about the dams has obscured the basic problem in the lower Colorado basin—there is simply not enough water there.

In an average year, 15 million acre-feet of water comes down the river. Yet, rights to 7.5 million acre-feet have been allocated to four upper basin states, 7.5 million more to three lower basin states and 1.5 million to Mexico. If Arizona diverts its full share, as it now seeks to do, Mexico will get nothing and California must cut its diversion.

This impasse has led Southwest legislators and water officials to cast covetous eyes on the waters of the Northwest's Columbia River.

A bill introduced last week by Senator Thomas H. Kuchel (R-Calif.) to authorize the Colorado River Basin Plan includes provision for a feasibility report on just such importation of water. It also would authorize construction of the Hualapai Dam.

One hope is that weather modification methods may be able to increase rainfall in the basin by 10 to 20 percent at a cost of around 50 cents an acre-foot. Under the CAP, irrigation water will sell for \$10 and municipal water \$55 an acre-foot at the canal.

According to the Secretary's proposal, those rates—\$5 higher to municipal and industrial users than with Bridge Canyon Dam—would be enough to pay for the project.

The total cost of the CAP alone is estimated at about \$585 million. The entire revised plan would cost about \$719 million.

"... we've ended the controversy, we've cut the costs," the Secretary proudly proclaimed.

The words were hardly out of his mouth before California and Colorado legislators jumped on him. Arizona legislators were notably quiet without even a comment on the higher water rates. Predictably, Pacific Northwest representatives were delighted.

"I am shocked," Senator Gordon Allott (R-Colo.) announced, "to see the Secretary literally flush down the drain all the years of work in trying to arrive at a realistic approach for a basin-wide development program."

Senator Henry M. Jackson (D-Wash.), chairman of the Senate Interior committee, took another view. The plan, he feels, is a "sound basis for agreement in Congress on a program which can go forward without the disputes between states and regions which have plagued previous proposals."