

## River Report

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### Saving Up for a Dry Day: Innovative Storage Plan Could Stretch Colorado River Supply

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Be it in a barrel, pond or underground, storing water for future use is by no means a novel concept. Having a dependable water supply safely tucked away can alleviate the impacts of a drought, minimize dependence on other sources and ensure water for those who need it, when they need it. In essence, having stored water can create confidence where there was uncertainty, self-sufficiency where there was dependency and quantity where there was dearth.

Expanded environmental consciousness, heightened costs and social needs, a lack of acceptable dam sites and their questionable benefits, have all led to downplaying big water projects as a means of storage. Consequently, the concept of "storing" water underground has taken on new proportions, as well as a new vocabulary. *Water banking* is considered by many to be a promising component of the solution to the encroaching water shortage within the Lower Basin.

Almost one year ago, the Department of the Interior (Interior) released a draft of the "Offstream Storage of Colorado River Water and Interstate Redemption of Storage Credits in the Lower Division States" (rule) -- considered, by some, the next addition to the Law of the River. By creating such regulations, Interior is forging ahead with the notion of the Lower Basin working to resolve its own water shortfalls.

"The purpose of the rule is to facilitate interstate transfers of Colorado River water," said Robert Johnson, director of the Lower Colorado Region of the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation (Bureau). "It will allow Nevada and California to pay Arizona to take water likely to be spilled and lost from the Colorado River system during wet years and put it in their [Arizona's] groundwater bank."

Like a financial institution that holds money for a person, company, state or country, a water bank stockpiles water. And like a financial bank, a water bank can use another's water for its own purposes just as long as a corresponding amount of "investment" is returned to the investor. Many parties, including those in the Upper Basin, support the prospect of the Lower Basin resolving its water deficit by its own means. However, a shortcoming of the interstate (between states) water banking concept thus far has been a lack of legal guidelines defining such a procedure. Renegotiating the existing "Law of the River" (the collection of compacts, agreements, acts and court decisions that apportion and regulate the Colorado River) to include water transfers would be a major undertaking and one which many say is next to impossible. Instead, officials have opted to use existing documents from the Law to allow for interstate banking.

After a year and a lengthy comment period, Interior expects the revised rule ready for publication by mid-December and to go before Congress at the onset of the new year. This issue of *River Report* will examine the state of the pending rule and its potential impact on Colorado River users.

