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which it curves its way.

There were early diversions in the 1800s from the river and from its tributaries. It was a river then that could be a rampaging giant, a spawner of killer, destructive floods in the spring, that, like a chameleon, turned into a placid trickle of water in the hot, dry months of summer. As diversions increased by the various states, the seeds were sown for a decades-long battle over apportionments.

Then in 1922, the [Colorado River Compact](#) was hammered out to apportion the beneficial consumptive use of the river's water between the upper and lower basins.

The dividing point between the two basins was set at Lee's Ferry near Page, Arizona. The upper basin states are Wyoming, Colorado, Utah and New Mexico, and the lower basin, Arizona, Nevada and California.

Agreement on the compact was necessary before legislation to harness the river could be introduced. After considerable maneuvering in Congress, legislation that cleared the way for building Boulder (now Hoover) Dam and its reservoir, Lake Mead, was passed in 1928. Completed in 1935, the dam was the first big step toward harnessing the wild, often violent river. In 1956, passage of the multi-provision [Colorado River Storage Project Act](#), allowing the upper basin states to develop use of their share of the river's water, resulted in construction of a number of facilities, including Glen Canyon Dam and Lake Powell, the second of the two major dams on the main stem of the Colorado.

When nature created the Colorado River, she plotted its course to wind from its headwaters in the high country of Colorado and Wyoming through Utah, Arizona, Nevada and California. This irresistible force forged its way through a wilderness of mountains, plateaus and deserts to the low country, eventually reaching the alkali salt flats of Mexico and emptying into the Gulf of California. As the river coursed on its way, other rivers, streams and brooks fed it, draining the mountain ranges of New Mexico and the other states through

## At A Glance

### Length of the river:

Approximately 1400 miles

### States in the Upper Basin of the Colorado River:

Wyoming, Utah, Colorado and New Mexico

### States in the lower basin of the Colorado River:

Arizona, California and Nevada

### Watershed area:

246,000 square miles

### Population served by Colorado River water:

Nearly 25 million

### Amount of water in an acre-foot:

Almost 326,000 gallons

### Amount of Colorado River water allotted to 7 basin states:

16 million acre-feet - 7.5 million to each basin & an additional 1 million to the lower basin

### Amount of river water guaranteed to Mexico:

1.5 million acre-feet

### Historic yearly flows:

From a high of nearly 24 million acre-feet - to a low of some 5 million acre-feet

### Primary source of supply:

Headwater snowmelt



Today the benefits of the Colorado River are numerous and impressive, though some go unrecognized by most. It not only meets the water and power needs of the

nearly 25 million people within the basin states and adjoining areas, but of many more when you include those south of the border in Mexico.

Water from reservoirs flow to people and large and small business and industry in cities such as Phoenix, Salt Lake City, Denver, Albuquerque, San Diego, Rock Springs, Las Vegas, Los Angeles and many others that are less well known but with one major commonality, rapid growth. Often having to face tremendous physical obstacles to reach the areas of need, the river's water travels through man-made channels built by muscle, sweat and ingenuity over mountains and across 242 miles of blistering desert in California to its coastal cities and across 300 miles in Arizona southeast to Phoenix and Tucson. In both states, the Colorado is a major player in maintaining the thriving economies. The river's water burrows eastward through tunnels under the Continental Divide in Colorado to reach its eastern cities of Ft. Collins, Denver, Colorado Springs and Pueblo. Similarly, in Utah, streams and rivers tributary to the Colorado will, on their way, meet the needs of people in Salt Lake, Utah, Duchesne, Wasatch and Juab counties with enough to supply about one-quarter of all the people living in the state. In Nevada, the glittering Las Vegas and the riverside boom town of Laughlin in large part owe their existence to the Colorado. Without the river's water, neither could be any more than a dry desert town. And more than one million residents of northwestern New Mexico and southwestern Wyoming depend on the waters of the San Juan, the Green and other tributaries feeding the Colorado to serve urban water users. Throughout the seven basin states, the Colorado River provides water for people and for business and industry - creating jobs for millions, jobs that contribute mightily to local economies and billions of dollars to the nation.



The Colorado's reservoirs also provide water for nourishing fruits and vegetables on the farms and for growing hay to feed cattle on the ranches. More than 1.4 million acres of irrigated land throughout the Colorado

River Basin produce about 15 percent of the nation's crops, 13 percent of its livestock, and agricultural benefits of more than \$1.5 billion a year. The water provides a means of livelihood for the people who work the water, for the many hands who raise premium beef and for those who till the soil. Whether Imperial Valley or Coachella, Yuma or Palo Verde Valley, once touched by the waters of the Colorado, fertile soil and lots of sunshine result in a year-round array of healthful

**Average rainfall in majority of basin:**

4 inches or less

**Average power generated using Colorado River water:**

12.2 trillion kilowatt hours (1996)

foods. Agricultural lands in the snow country of the basin come alive when winter dissolves into spring. At the end of the season, each box of cherries, basket of peaches or pound of apples, every bushel of corn, bale of hay or pound of beef, every head of lettuce is indebted to the Colorado River or the streams that feed it.

Not widely recognized are the ecological pluses that have been realized as a result of Colorado River development. The cool, clear water below Glen Canyon Dam has allowed the establishment of a blue-ribbon trout fishery. The riparian vegetation belt is said to be the only riparian area in the South-west to have improved in the 1900s. There has been a greatly increased species diversity and numbers in the Grand Canyon - especially bird species - tied directly to the increase in the quality of the riparian habitat. The placement of Glen Canyon Dam encouraged the establishment of an important bald eagle wintering area and the largest breeding population of peregrine falcons in the lower 48 states. The improved habitat continues to attract new species to the canyon. Waterfowl and the great blue heron are now nesting there.

Unfortunately, there also have been setbacks. Valuable marshland and backwater habitats that had been established were severely impacted by the 1983-84 floods. The extent to which they will recover is not yet clear.

The benefits provided by the Colorado River don't end with the environment. Add the flood control resulting from taming an unruly bully of a river, the production of clean, non-polluting hydroelectric power and other forms of energy generated in the basin states with the aid of water from the Colorado, and recreation, including one of the best white-water rafting experiences in the world. A picture comes into focus of the many benefits of the Colorado to the western United States and to the entire country.