Section 2 – Control of the River

Colorado River Compact

With the constant threat of flood looming along the wild Colorado River, demands grew for some sort of control of the river.

As more states wanted water from the River, 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 Ferry near Page, Arizona. The upper basin states include Wyoming, Colorado, Utah and New Mexico, and the lower basin states are Arizona, Nevada, and California. Both upper and lower basins were allowed 7.5 million acre feet (MAF) per year; provided no less than 75 MAF for any ten-year period to flow from the Upper to the Lower Basin; and provided that the Upper and Lower Basins share any obligation to Mexico.

Agreement on the compact was necessary before harnessing of the river could be achieved. There was a lot of controversy centered on how the Colorado would be apportioned between the upper and lower basins, two nations, and the American tribes.

The Colorado River Compact included representatives of the seven states who negotiated the historic compact to remove causes of present and future controversies surrounding apportionment of the river's waters. But those who signed the compact at that time could not have predicted the enormous urban growth in the desert southwest. Perhaps the biggest problem with the 1922 compact was its mistaken belief that the river's yield was between 20 and 21 MAF annually. Actual annual flow is closer to 15 MAF, thus the river was oversubscribed.

Control of the River

The mighty Colorado River is now kept in check by over 30 dams that supply water to nearly 30 million people and irrigate approximately 6,000 square miles of agricultural land as well as controlling the flooding along the river.

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 the passage of the multi-provision Colorado River Storage Project Act allowed the upper basin states to develop use of their share of the river's water, resulting in the construction of a number of facilities, including Glen Canon Dam and Lake Powell, the second of the two major dams on the main stem of the Colorado.

In addition to controlling the flooding along the wild Colorado River, the dams provided water for agriculture irrigation, municipal and commercial needs, industrial needs, and the increasing power demands.

Control at the Sea…

After the breach was controlled in 1907, the sea no longer had an inflow that would maintain its water level. Because of this, the Sea was thought to dry up in about 10 – 20 years. With the controlling of the River and the now distribution of water to agriculture fields, agriculture expanded.

In 1924 President Calvin Coolidge declared the Sea as an agricultural sump, which would collect all agricultural runoff as well as give the Sea an inflow that would preserve its water level.

Water Distribution along the Colorado River

The Colorado River Compact of 1922 provided adequate water for present needs in the Basin and protected the water rights of those states that were not growing as fast as California. The Compact divided entitlements to Colorado River water, 7.5 MAF to each of the Upper and Lower Basins, but each Basin was responsible for dividing the water among them.

The Boulder Canyon Project Act of 1928 divided the Lower Basin entitlement: 2.8 MAF for Arizona, 300,000 AF for Nevada, and 4.4 MAF for California. California was also entitled to 50% of any surplus water available to the Lower Basin. This law also authorized the construction of Imperial Diversion Dam and the All American Canal.

The Upper Basin Compact of 1948 divided the entitlement between the Upper Basin states. However, since the residual amount available each year for the upper basin was variable, those states agreed to divide water among them on a percentage basis, with one exception – Arizona would receive 50,000 acre-feet for its small upper basin area. As for the rest, Colorado would lead in the list of allotments with about 52 percent; Utah with 23 percent to provide its growing cities and farms and Wyoming with a 14 percent share followed in order; and New Mexico would have about 11 percent for its uses.

Power at the River

One of the major benefits of the Colorado River is its production of hydroelectric power. The annual production of electricity from the hydroelectric plants in the upper basin is 1,804,857kW and 2,438,800kW in the lower basin. It not only meets the water and power needs of the nearly 25 million people within the basin states and adjoining areas, but many more when you include those south of the border in Mexico.

Power at the Sea…

The first electric energy produced at the Salton Sea was in 1903 by W.F. Holt when he conceived the first hydroelectric drop in Imperial Valley. Holt's company, Holton Power Company, provided light and power to the entire Imperial Valley until 1916, then sold his company to the Nevada California Company (Nev-Cal).

The All-American Canal was built in 1934 to supply water to the agricultural fields and to create electrical power along the canal, which would help repay the construction cost of the canal. Subsequently, in 1943, Imperial Irrigation District (IID) purchased the facilities of private power companies in the Imperial and Coachella valleys, which allowed IID to transmit and distribute power over a large and growing area. Today, IID provides power to over 95,000 customers and produces over 500MW of power.

However, there is some good news in the recreation venue. In the past four years, the visitation at the Salton Sea has increased to an average of 250,000 a year. This is a very positive number considering that in the 1994/1995 fiscal year, the Sea had an all time low of 87,000 visitors.

The Salton Sea Recreation Area will be getting somewhat of a facelift in the near future. New fishing jetties, a boat launch, harbor facilities, upgraded campgrounds, day use areas, more parking areas, expanded trails and visitor centers are all in the planning.

Still need:
Points of interest (map or graph)
Visitation Numbers
Campgrounds, Beaches (map or graph)
$$ Values of recreation

Points to ponder: What effects did fishkills and bird die-offs have on recreation? What about the smell? The negative image of the Sea put forth by the media. I bet Steve Horvitz's newspaper clippings will help us with that. I would like to borrow that from him.

Blue = things needed
Red = things completed, but need work
Green = possible side bar topics

1909: Thinking the Salton Sea would be gone by the 1920s, the U.S. Government reserves in trust an additional 10,000 acres of land under the sea for the benefit of the Torres Martinez Band.

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