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Barry Nelson's Blog

Different Approaches to Finding Solutions for the Colorado River and the Bay-Delta



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The two largest river systems and water sources in the arid West are the Colorado River and the San Francisco Bay-Delta. Both face growing challenges, shaped in significant part by a warming climate. The Bay-Delta faces a crashing ecosystem, the likelihood of declining water supplies and long-term risks -- from sea level rise and earthquakes -- to a vast network of Delta levees and subsided islands. The Colorado River no longer reaches its destination at the Sea of Cortez. Its Delta is nearly dry. Many of its native fish are in trouble. Demand exceeds water supply today and the [Bureau of Reclamation anticipates dramatic water shortages in the future](#).

All parties recognize that current trends aren't sustainable for water users or the environment. New solutions are required for both river basins, in order to restore a healthy environment and improve water supply reliability. Interestingly, it strikes me that agencies and stakeholders in the two basins are taking dramatically different approaches to finding those solutions.

Let's start with the Bay-Delta. Earlier this week, the Delta Vision Foundation [released its report card](#) on progress toward a comprehensive package of solutions for the Bay-Delta. This detailed and thoughtful document covers a broad range of Delta-related programs, actions and agencies. One of the Foundation's principle criticisms of current Bay-Delta efforts is that "near-term actions are stalling." In fact, the Foundation gave current agency efforts on near-term solutions a grade of "D-". (Last year's grade was a D.)

The Foundation also concluded that "the level of effort is impressive" on Bay-Delta issues. Why the apparent conflict between these two conclusions? In short, the Foundation concluded that there is a tremendous current investment in efforts to develop long-term solutions through the BDCP and Delta Plan programs, but that short-term actions like improving Delta levees and beginning ecosystem restoration are proceeding far more slowly than is needed. As a result, the Foundation's first recommendation focused on levee improvements -- a critical near-term action. Another example of the lack of near-term progress is the extraordinarily slow pace of habitat restoration, despite a requirement in the existing Delta biological opinions for the restoration of approximately 30,000 acres of floodplain and wetland habitat by 2020.

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Turning now to Colorado River Basin efforts, it strikes me that agencies and stakeholders are using an approach that is the mirror image of the trend described by the Delta Vision Foundation.

In recent years, a great deal of effort has gone into developing near-term water management solutions, in light of the decade-long drought on the Colorado. Among these near-term solutions are [water banking agreements between Nevada and Arizona](#) and the Bureau of Reclamation's [interim guidelines](#) regarding the allocation of shortages in the Lower Basin. I was also struck at a recent Colorado River conference by the commitment among agencies and stakeholders to develop workable interim solutions and to develop relationships that set the stage for more far-reaching long-term efforts. (Don't get me wrong - there is still plenty of room for more near-term solutions in the Colorado River Basin – such as an ambitious basin-wide effort to improve water use efficiency.)

What about long-term solutions for the Colorado River? The Bureau of Reclamation's [Colorado River Basin Supply and Demand Study](#) is putting the long-term challenges in sharp focus. The Bureau's conservative interim conclusions paint a stark picture of the challenges that would result from a status quo approach in light of the likely impacts of climate change on the available water supply in the basin. The Bureau's study is scheduled to be completed in September. What I find interesting is that there is no well-established forum to address the Bureau's findings that includes federal agencies, as well as all of the Basin states, water agencies and stakeholders. In short, there isn't a well-established and comprehensive Basin-wide forum to pick up the ball from the Bureau's Basin Study. Given the size of the basin, the diversity of the players and the scale of the challenge, such a forum is likely to be critical to developing and implementing a sufficiently ambitious long-term plan.

In the Bay-Delta, by contrast, recent years have brought the passage of an ambitious and comprehensive package of water legislation, as well as the creation of the BDCP process, the Delta Vision Task Force and the Delta Stewardship Council. All of these efforts have been focused on developing a long-term plan for the Bay-Delta. Some of these efforts also address near-term actions, but at a much lower level of effort.

This is certainly an overly simplistic portrayal of the situation in these two large and complex communities of water interests. Yet the point is an important one. Neither of the approaches described above is the "right" one. But there is a great deal to be learned by looking at these very different strategies to designing new water policies for the coming century.

Agencies and stakeholders in each basin face significant risks if they ignore either the long-term or the near-term. Too much focus on the long-term can risk significant short-term impacts from Delta levee failures and continued environmental degradation. Too much focus on the short term runs the opposite risk. In the Colorado River Basin, another extended drought could mean that the "long-term" water supply picture arrives before we're ready for it.

The truth is that we don't have the luxury of ignoring either long-term or short-term solutions. In the Bay-Delta, this realization suggests the need for a strengthened focus on actions like levee investments and high-payoff ecosystem restoration projects like floodplain restoration. In the Colorado, it suggests the need for the creation of a basin-

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wide forum to involve all interests in the effort to develop and implement solutions.

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