

## The West is hurtling toward a water crisis

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The Utah Legislature will soon begin its 2009 session, and we may expect bills promoting two favorite pieces of home-grown pork, the Lake Powell pipeline and Transition Power's nuclear nightmare on the Green River.

But before legislators cast more of our recession-stretched cash before these two swine, they should read the latest study of Colorado River issues, James Powell's *Dead Pool*, from which the following is taken.

For eight years under George W. Bush, the Bureau of Reclamation has refused to acknowledge the effects that global warming is having and will yet have on the Colorado, in spite of record temperatures and the recent 500-year drought that nearly brought Lake Powell to its knees. Instead, the bureau continues to use only data from the last century, the first half of which was one of the wettest periods in the known history of the Colorado. According to Bush's BOR, in 2050 Lake Powell, which reflects the health of the river as a whole, will stand at 3,660 feet, just 40 feet below full pool.

Studies done by climate scientists suggest an entirely different future. Recent tree-ring studies have shown that the true multicentury average flow of the river is well below that used by the BOR. They also show periods when river flow, even without the effects of global warming, was lower than that experienced in our 500-year drought.

When one adds to this natural variability and drought-prone history even a conservative estimate of projected global warming effects, the results are devastating. Current estimates of how much the flow of the Colorado might be reduced range between 6 and 30 percent. Using just a 10-percent figure, and accepting the bureau's own estimates of increased demand and new draws such as the Lake Powell pipeline, Powell gives a harrowing scenario in which Lake Powell drops to "dead pool" by 2022, rendering projects such as the pipeline useless almost as soon as they become operational.

But far scarier is the possibility that in this time frame the effects of the devastation of the Colorado due to overuse and reduced flow could well render life in today's desert megacities such as Phoenix and Las Vegas impossible. What Powell's book shows is that global warming is without any stretch of imagination capable of rendering life in western America unrecognizable not in our grandchildren's lifetime but in ours.

While I doubt that the 2009 Legislature will take this scenario seriously, there are others in this state who might. No one has more at stake in this crisis-in-the-making than the LDS Church. Let me therefore pose a "morality" question to church leaders. Given the possibility that the Colorado will not be available for future development in the Mormon heartland, what stance is the church willing to take on growth and conservation in southern Utah? Given the possibility that St. George will have *no* additional sources of water for future use, and that all sources will be put under climate strain, what is a provident church to do today to prevent future catastrophe?

With such possibilities to consider, the proposition that we will take Colorado River water to run nuclear power plants or to promote continued unsustainable growth in the nation's second-driest state is not only an absurdity. It is cultural genocide. What the federal government failed to accomplish in its persecution of the Mormons a century ago, Mormon legislators, county councils, mayors, and developers are visiting on themselves.

In the words of Bernard DeVoto, "The future of the West hinges on whether it can defend itself against itself."

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