

Lake Mead water outlook improves

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LAS VEGAS (AP) — Wet weather in May and June brought good news Monday from federal water managers keeping close tabs on the Colorado River water supply for about 40 million residents in seven Southwest U.S. states.

The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation projected normal water deliveries to residents, farms, tribes and businesses at least through 2016 and possibly through 2017, water agency officials in Arizona, Nevada and California said.

“We may have dodged a bullet for the next few years,” said William Hasencamp, Colorado River resources chief for the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California.

Chuck Cullom, Colorado River programs manager for the Central Arizona Project in Phoenix, said the report gives municipal and state water authorities in Arizona, California, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, Utah and Wyoming a little more time to address what everyone acknowledges is a the long-term gap between supply and demand.

Cullom sounded optimistic.

“Water agencies in the lower basin have been working cooperatively to conserve water for the past couple of years,” he said. “The result is an improvement in the overall water picture.”

The bureau’s 24-month projection came with the West still in the grips of a historic drought, and with Lake Mead just 38 percent full.

Upstream, the Lake Powell reservoir behind Glen Canyon Dam has improved to 53 percent of capacity, said Rose Davis, spokeswoman for the Bureau of Reclamation in Boulder City, Nevada.

The projection softened warnings made in May that there was a chance of supply cuts next year amounting to 4.3 percent to Nevada and 11.4 percent to Arizona.

“As of May, we were at 50-50 chance of shortage” in 2016, Hasencamp said. “We could have had the first-ever shortage declaration today.”

Instead, Hasencamp said the bureau reported that average precipitation this winter could get the region through 2017. He noted that climatologists are calling for an El Nino weather pattern in coming months that could funnel storms from the Pacific Ocean ashore in California, bringing snow to the Sierra Nevada and Rocky Mountains.

A shortage declaration would be indexed to the Lake Mead water level, which fell to a historic low

1,074.71 feet above sea level on June 26.

The lake level on Sunday was a little above 1,078 feet, or 3 feet above the crucial 1,075-foot shortage trigger point.

Cullom noted that farmers, more than cities, would feel the brunt of possible cuts in Arizona that would compare with the amount of water used by 600,000 homes a year. Nevada's 4.3 percent cut would equate with the amount used annually by about 26,000 homes.

Drought-stricken California would continue to be able to draw its 4.4 million acre-foot allocation of Colorado River water, even if Arizona and Nevada are affected. One acre-foot of water is about enough to serve two average homes for a year

Gary Wockner, a conservationist with the Denver-based advocacy group Save the Colorado, noted Monday that both the Lake Mead and Lake Powell reservoirs remain near their lowest levels in history.

Meanwhile, less water comes into the system every year than the 16.5 million acre-feet promised annually to users in the seven U.S. states and Mexico.

The Colorado River Compact of 1922 projected that the river would take in about 15 million acre-feet from rainfall and snowmelt annually. Drought has cut that figure.

"The water supply situation is getting worse, but not as fast as it was prior to the miracle rains in May and June in Colorado," Wockner said. "There's no sustainable path forward, unless water supply managers make consequential change or unless the climate gets wetter."