

Less Colorado River Water for California

What Does It Mean For Los Angeles and Mono Lake?

by Frances Spivy-Weber and Geoffrey McQuilkin

On January 1, California suddenly had a whole lot less water. The Department of Interior cut back California's share of Colorado River water by 800,000 acre-feet after the state failed to meet a Colorado River use plan deadline, though ultimately the cutback simply returns the state back to the rations it was always supposed to live with.

The reduction primarily affects the urban Southern California water supply, adding to the challenge of meeting the water needs of Los Angeles and other Southern California communities. The good news, however, is that Los Angeles and Southern California are far better able to deal with this challenge than they would have been ten years ago.

The Los Angeles Department of Water and Power (DWP) serves its customers water from the Los Angeles Aqueduct (Owens River and Mono Basin streams), California and Colorado River Aqueducts (supplied by the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California), and groundwater. The Mono Lake Committee has worked hard to see that there is funding from both the state and federal government for water conservation and recycling to replace the water being left at Mono Lake thanks to the 1994 Water Board order. This approach of having a diverse portfolio of options to stretch water supplies has been adopted throughout the region, making it possible now for the Metropolitan Water District (MWD) to assure its member agencies, including DWP, that

the loss of Colorado River supplies will not create a crisis in the short term.

What Los Angeles will do in the long term is still unclear. Over the last ten years, half of the water DWP provided its customers was from the Los Angeles Aqueduct. Now, however, in addition to restoring Mono Lake, DWP is dedicating aqueduct water to Owens Lake for dust control efforts. DWP has turned to the Metropolitan Water District (MWD) to supplement its supplies, a practice that is also common during droughts. In 2000/01, 51% of LA's water came from MWD. The reduction in MWD's water supply, therefore, is an important consideration for Los Angeles as it plans to meet its future needs.

Could part of DWP's plan be revisiting the State Water Board decision and taking more water from the Mono Basin? Any change to Mono diversions would require revision of the 1994 State Water Board order on Mono—a significant action, but one that can be requested at any time. In the bigger political picture, making a move on Mono's water is a tall order. The win-win conservation solutions forged at Mono Lake are a statewide model. And most importantly, the commitment of Mono Lake Committee members who know that constant protection requires continuing vigilance means that the Committee today has a strong and influential voice in water politics on behalf of our favorite lake. ❖

Will the State Play a Shell Game With Proposition 50?

In November 2002 voters of California approved a bond for \$3.44 billion to meet a wide range of water needs and to protect coastal watersheds and wetlands. The Mono Lake Committee was especially enthusiastic about the bond because it funds the Bay-Delta Authority program (see page 10), long-needed safe drinking water projects, and regional water management at a time when there is limited state and federal financial support.

The bond was an initiative, and it will need state legislation in 2003 to give further definition to how the monies will be

spent. Given the tremendous shortfall in the State budget, many people whose projects are not covered in the bond, will be working hard this spring to see if they can influence the legislature to stretch or outright change the intent of the bond. The Mono Lake Committee will be working with others to make sure that when we lift the "shell" under which we expect to find funds for conservation, recycling, and other bond-funded projects, the dollars will actually be there. Watch the Mono Lake Committee Website at www.monolake.org for details.