

National Opinion: A Solution to the Colorado Water Crisis

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The following is the opinion and analysis of the writers:

On April 17, the Department of the Interior released its emergency plan to help the Colorado River Basin States solve the water problem on the Colorado River. This plan requires releasing water from the Flaming Gorge Reservoir and decreasing the amount of water released downstream from Lake Powell through the end of 2027.

Questions need to be asked: What if the snowfall on the Western Slope doesn't return by the end of 2027? Then what do you do? Will the continuing lack of water to the Lower Basin States, CA, NV, and AZ, cause someone in Interior to eye the water in the Roberts and Moffat Tunnels that supply almost 50% of Denver's water supply?

We believe the best solution is to bring new water to the Colorado River. This basin contributes at least \$1.4 trillion in GDP, serves over 40 million people with water and irrigates 5.5 million acres of farmland, producing tens of billions of dollars' worth of food for the entire country.

Lakes Mead and Powell have a combined capacity of 16.4 trillion (T) gals. They currently contain just 4.5 T gals (27.6% of capacity). To get to 50% capacity, which would greatly relieve pressure on the entire system, we would need to bring 3.7 T gals (8.2 – 4.5) of new water to the Glen Canyon Dam and then let it flow downriver using the current infrastructure.

There is a place in the U.S. that could provide the necessary water — the Atchafalaya River in Louisiana.

The Army Corps of Engineers has ensured since the early '60s that the Atchafalaya River drains 30% of the entire Mississippi watershed into the Gulf of Mexico without generating any electricity or providing any significant commercial shipping. As of April 27, this river is discharging 1,508,000 gals/sec into the Gulf and the long-term average for the last 60 years has been 1.4 million gals/sec. (rivergages.com) This is a massive amount of water. To put it in perspective, 1.4 million gals/sec is the same as 140 10,000-gallon gasoline trucks every second (!) going into the Gulf without doing anything.

If a 1,200-mile water conveyance system with 50,000 gals/sec capacity, <4%, of the average flow or just 5 of those 140 gasoline tank trucks, were built from Vidalia, La., to the Glen Canyon Dam, we could get that 3.7 T gals in approximately 2 years and 4 months.

The engineering to build and maintain such water systems is well-known and has been used repeatedly in our nation's history. The California and Colorado River Aqueducts and the Central Arizona Project are examples.

Yes, this would be a long system, but we have built 49,000 miles of Interstate Highways and over 191,00 miles of petroleum pipelines in the U.S., including two massive oil pipelines in less than a year in the 1940s.

Why not build desalination plants? Well, you'd need a lot of them. Sorek, Israel, has two modern desalination plants that each provide about 2,000 gals/sec of water, so if you want to create a capacity of 50,000 gals/sec, you'd need 25 such plants. These would take decades to build, are very expensive to operate, and you'd need to build a conveyance system anyway to get the water up to the Glen Canyon Dam.

We estimate the cost of the Atchafalaya route to be on the order of building 1,200 miles of new Interstate Highway, approximately \$15 billion or \$25 billion if extrapolating the cost of the Colorado River Aqueduct.

Financing would come not from anyone's budget or new taxes but from a new National Infrastructure Bank. A similar institution financed Hoover, Parker and Imperial Dams, and the two large oil pipelines mentioned above. There is a bill in Congress, HR5356, that would create a \$5 trillion National Infrastructure Bank to do just this. It would require no new federal spending or new federal taxes. There are currently 58 sponsors of this bill, but none from Arizona.

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