

A reprieve for water users in Western states

By Felicity Barringer, New York Times

Not quite five months ago, on Nov. 27, the level of Lake Mead, the massive federal reservoir that serves faucets and fields in Nevada, Arizona and California, hit an all-time low level of 1,081.85 feet above sea level. Seven feet lower, and the first water shortage ever would have been declared in the river's lower basin.

An unusually wet winter, however, has given the basin a reprieve, and policy makers think they will have enough water to keep promises to every user from Mexico to Las Vegas to San Diego, while still filling Lake Mead to a level 30 feet or more above the shortage line of 1,075 feet this year. Rains began strongly in late December and continued with enough oomph through the winter to leave the snow pack in the mountains above the river 120 percent higher than normal.

So the Interior Department announced this week that it would follow its original plan and deliver 40 percent more water than usual from Lake Powell, the Utah reservoir that is 357 miles upstream and about 2,500 feet uphill from Lake Mead. With users in Los Angeles, Las Vegas and the agricultural valleys of California and Arizona expected to take a little less than normal for 2011, most of the excess of more than three million acre-feet will stay in Lake Mead, the lower of the two massive Colorado River reservoirs that have enabled the rapid growth of Phoenix, Las Vegas and southern California.

Problem solved? Not exactly. At least, not for the long term.

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