

Will dams again rise across the West?

Environmentalists urge conservation instead, but some officials weigh idea

SPOKANE, Wash. - The Western states' era of massive dam construction — which tamed rivers, swallowed towns, and created irrigated agriculture, cheap hydropower and environmental problems — effectively ended in 1966 with the completion of Glen Canyon Dam.

But the region's booming population and growing fears about climate change have governments once again studying construction of dams to capture more winter rain and spring snowmelt for use in dry summer months.

"The West and the Northwest are increasing in population growth like never before," said John Redding, regional spokesman for the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation in Boise. "How do you quench the thirst of the hungry masses?"

The population of the Western states grew nearly 20 percent in the 1990s, to more than 64 million, and continues to swell even as climate change poses new threats to the water supply.

Ironically, consideration of new dams comes even as older ones are being torn down across the country because of environmental concerns — worries that will likely pose big obstacles to new construction. In Oregon, a proposed deal would remove four dams on the Klamath River to restore struggling salmon runs.

There are lots of other ideas for increasing water supplies in the West. They include conservation, storing water in natural underground aquifers, pipelines to carry water from the mountains, desalination plants to make drinking water from the ocean, small dams to serve local areas.

Most of those ideas are much more popular than big new dams.

Washington's Democratic Gov. Christine Gregoire put together a coalition of business, government and environmental groups to create the Columbia River Management Plan, which calls for spending \$200 million to study various proposals for finding more water for arid eastern Washington.

Smaller dams on tributaries?

Jay Manning, director of the Washington state Department of Ecology, believes that huge new dams on the main stems of rivers are unlikely. But it is quite possible that tributaries will be dammed.

"It is inevitable we will take steps to increase water supply," Manning said. "Storage is part of that solution."

With demand for water already high, pressure is being increased by fears that climate change will produce rain instead of snow in winter, reducing the slow-melting snowpack that provides water in dry summer months.

Gregoire's plan drew the support of many environmentalists by including many ideas they prefer, including conservation measures and metering more uses of water.

But the state also is studying dams, drawing opposition from some environmentalists, particularly a group called the Center for Environmental Law and Policy.

"Our water future doesn't lie with new dams," said Dr. John Osborn, a Spokane physician and chairman of the Sierra Club chapter in Spokane. "It's water conservation."

Osborn contends dam boosters are pushing for new dams to benefit business, underplaying the costs and environmental destruction and ignoring the benefits of improving conservation.

In other states:

- Four major water storage projects are being studied in California, including a proposal for a new dam on the San Joaquin River, said Sue McClurg, of the Water Education Foundation in Sacramento. Republicans in the California Assembly say they will block any plan to improve water supplies that doesn't include new dams.
- The Southern Nevada Water Authority, which serves Las Vegas, is considering a reservoir to capture more Colorado River water before it flows into Mexico.
- In Colorado, there is a proposal to create two new reservoirs on the Yampa River.
- Some in Idaho still hope to rebuild the Teton Dam, which collapsed in 1976, killing 11 people.

A major barrier to new dams is cost, which runs into the billions, Manning said. It's uncertain how much the federal government would be willing to pay.

\$6.7 billion estimate for one dam

A recent study of the Black Rock dam proposal in the Yakima River basin concludes the 600-foot-high dam would cost \$6.7 billion to build and operate, and would return just 16 cents for every dollar spent.

The explosive growth of the West is in part a product of a binge in dam construction that provided plentiful water and cheap electricity. The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation and Army Corps of Engineers built more than 472 dams, including Shasta in California, Bonneville on the Oregon-Washington state line, Fort Peck Dam in Montana and Grand Coulee Dam in Washington.

But the era of giant dams essentially ended with the Glen Canyon Dam, just upstream from the Grand Canyon on the Arizona-Utah state line, which galvanized the environmental movement because its Lake Powell inundated a huge swath of scenic land, archaeological sites and places important to native Americans.

Lake Powell and its downstream cousin, Lake Mead — two of the nation's largest manmade reservoirs — provide water for millions of people in Nevada, Arizona and California.

However, both lakes are only half full after years of drought, and researchers at San Diego's Scripps Institution of Oceanography figure climate change and growing demand could drain them within just 13 years.

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