Issue #2640
December 20, 2024

Western States Water

Addressing Water Needs and Strategies for a Sustainable Future

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ADMINISTRATION/WATER QUALITY
Abandoned Mines

On December 12, the Department of Interior (DOI) announced $3.7M to help States inventory, assess, reclaim and remediate abandoned hardrock mines through the Abandoned Hardrock Mine Reclamation (AHMR) grant program. Funding for Abandoned Hardrock Mine Reclamation (AHMR) on state and private lands will be distributed through a grant program managed by the Environmental Compliance and Cleanup Division (ECCD). The Department of the Interior will provide grants to reclaim those lands based on eligibility requirements established in Sec. 40704 of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act and the AHMR Program. State grant awards start at $50,000. DOI is accepting applications for State grants through February 28, 2025.

Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for Policy, Management and Budget, Joan Mooney said: "Communities across the country are experiencing the impacts from improperly abandoned hardrock mines, like contaminated drinking water. Thanks to the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, we are making critical investments to clean-up these areas, while also creating jobs and revitalizing communities."

ADMINISTRATION/WATER RESOURCES
Stream and Wetland Restoration

On December 2, the Biden-Harris administration and the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation and other partners announced 61 grants (totaling $122.4M) through the America the Beautiful Challenge. The Nez Perce Tribe will receive $1.9M to address habitat impacts from historic hydraulic mining in Leggett Creek, Idaho. The project will reduce excess sediment delivery into critical habitat for steelhead, spring Chinook and bull trout through restoration of the 22-acre abandoned mine site. The project aims to stabilize eroding slopes, plant native evergreens and deciduous shrubs, and improve aquatic passage of over 23 miles of upstream spawning and rearing fish habitat. Other notable projects funded under this announcement include: (1) Designing Habitat Connectivity and Ensuring Resilience for Lahontan Cutthroat Trout, $2.5M to the Summit Lake Paiute Tribe (Nevada); (2) Jemez River and Vallecito Creek Stream, Riparian and Wetland Restoration on Pueblo of Jemez Land, $2.1M to the Pueblo of Jemez (New Mexico); (3) Protecting Treaty Rights: Restoring Chinook Salmon to the South Fork Nooksack River, $5M to the Lummi Indian Business Council (Washington); (4) Teanaway Forks Salmon and Steelhead Habitat Restoration, $3.8M to the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (Washington); and (5) Upper Columbia and Sanpoil River Redband Trout Habitat Restoration, $3.5M to the Colville Tribes Fish and Wildlife Department (Washington).

DOI Secretary Deb Haaland said "President Biden's America the Beautiful initiative has been truly transformative. By working together across the federal family, and through private-public partnerships, we have built an enduring path to support hundreds of locally led collaborative conservation projects across the country. The America the Beautiful Challenge has advanced engagement with Tribes, funding a record amount of Tribally led efforts and elevating the use of Indigenous Knowledge to benefit endangered species and treasured landscapes. These innovative investments will leave a lasting legacy on our nation's lands and waters."

NIDIS/Drought

On December 11, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) National Integrated Drought Information System (NIDIS) released a drought status update on conditions and impacts in the West. NIDIS predicted that temperature will play a key role in snow drought development, with National Weather Service outlooks favoring above-normal temperatures for all western states through December.

Early season snow drought conditions are widespread throughout northern Utah, Wyoming, and southwestern Montana due to a warm, dry start to the water year. Some Snow Telemetry (SNOTEL) stations in southwestern Montana and in Wyoming are reporting record low SWE. In central Utah and most of Colorado, snowpack is near-to-above normal due to snow storms in late October and late November. Persistent drought

conditions and above average temperatures across the Snake River headwaters region led to record low early season snowpack. Nearly all Arizona SNOTEL stations report below-normal SWE, with most stations below 25% of normal. New Mexico conditions vary across the State, with mostly below-normal SWE in the Upper Rio Grande basin, Rio Grande-Elephant Butte basin, and the Upper Canadian Basin. California and Nevada received the first significant snowfall in late November. Above-normal SWE has persisted in mid-to-high elevations on the west slope of the Sierra Nevada since then. SWE is above normal in most areas, but below normal at lower elevations.

Oregon and Washington received significant snowfall throughout the Cascade Range, increasing SWE equivalent to above normal for most of the region. South-central Alaska experienced above-normal snowpack in late October, drier than normal conditions throughout November, and abruptly above normal temperatures and rain the first week of December.

ORGANIZATIONS

CRWUA

On December 4-6 the Colorado River Water Users Association held its annual conference in Las Vegas, Nevada. Prior to the conference, the Upper Colorado River Commission held its 310th Regular Meeting. Other meetings of the day included: (1) a panel of research leaders on extreme weather; (2) a panel on the risks of litigation.

On December 5, Carly Jerla, Bureau of Reclamation, gave an update on Post-2026 Operations for Lake Powell and Lake Mead. Jerla provided a comparison of the alternatives under consideration for Reclamation's environmental analysis (WSW # 2638.) A preferred alternative has not been identified. Reclamation plans to release a NEPA Alternatives Report in December.

Jennifer Gimbel, Colorado State University, moderated panels of key negotiators from both Lower and Upper Basin States. During the Lower Basin Principal's Panel, John J. Enstminger (NV) emphasized the contributions of the Lower Basin States which he said resulted in Lake Mead's elevation being 1064 feet instead of 921 feet. He said: "We believe compromise is possible. We think it's the first, second and third best option, but we need a dance partner…" Tom Buschatzke (AZ) emphasized Arizona's reductions in consumptive use from 2.8 million acre-feet (MAF) to 1.9 MAF since 2014. He highlighted that the Lower Basin's proposed alternative included reductions of 1.5 MAF for the Lower Basin, noting the impact those numbers would have on Arizona Tribes and cities. He said the Lower Basin Alternative was about those numbers: "We're going to find a way to deal with them but that's not enough. The 1.5 MAF is not enough. We need more, and that's where we really are looking for others in the basin to help meet those reductions that are necessary." JB Hamby (CA) detailed California's reduction in water use since 2002, accomplished through various agreements, state laws, and local programs. He emphasized that California represents the bulk of the agricultural productivity and half the population of the entire basin. He said: "It's not easy to do hard things, particularly when you're doing it for the first time. What we've developed in California and throughout the Lower Basin, I think, in many ways provides a great blueprint for adaptation to the future we're going to have to contend with. The only question is, are we going to work together to do it, or do we want to wear jerseys and be at odds?"

During the Upper Basin Principals Panel, Estevan López (NM) described the Upper Basin proposal, which aligns with hydrologic condition and aims to rebuild storage (WSW #2602). He emphasized the intent of the compact to divide the main stem of the river 50-50, with the understanding that the Upper Basin would develop more slowly. He said that the Upper Basin had only been able to develop about 5.15 MAF of its 7.5 MAF allocation due to hydrologic shortages. He said: "We're in this game with the resources Mother Nature has given us. We think it is an equitable way of resetting things to a more equitable system that was contemplated under the compact." Brandon Genhart (WY) emphasized the need for empathy, collaboration and understanding toward the specific challenges faced by each State in the basin. He said: "We need leadership, not rhetoric. And I'm here telling everybody here that Wyoming is committed to meeting whenever, wherever and however often we need to make this happen." Becky Mitchell (CO) emphasized the importance of collaboration and realism. She acknowledged the hard work of the Lower Basin, but emphasized the need for acknowledgment of the existing natural shortages in the Upper Basin. She said: "We are focused on the task at hand. The task at hand is not all about what the shortages are. It's about living within the supply. There is no other solution but living within the supply. No other solution…. There is never enough and that's what we're asking to be acknowledged." Gene Shawcroft (UT) noted that the problem is the lack of enough water, and emphasized the need to be realistic about the current situation and to work together.

Other panels included topics such as: (1) developing agricultural resilience; (2) municipal water supply and demand; (3) environmental and conservation-minded Post-2026 Operations proposals; (4) federal investments to finance Post-2026 Operations; (5) a sovereign to sovereign dialogue among Tribal leaders; and (6) a sovereign to sovereign dialogue between International Boundary & Water Commission leaders.
