



CARPE DIEM WEST

Our water – Finding solutions together

GOVERNING LIKE A RIVER BASIN

OPTIONS FOR EXPANDED STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT IN THE COLORADO RIVER BASIN

PREFACE: *BROADER STAKEHOLDER PARTICIPATION—A MEANS TO AN END*

The Colorado River Basin faces profound long-term water management challenges. Annual water demand now roughly equals annual supply, and climate change is expected to make the basin much warmer—thereby reducing water yields. The system is vast and complex, including thousands of miles of streams, reservoirs, canals, pipelines, and other infrastructure spanning 7 U.S. and 2 Mexican states. To further complicate matters, the basin includes an array of state, federal, and local jurisdictions—as well as numerous non-governmental stakeholder groups—and a host of competing interests. As the conversation in the basin shifts to the search for lasting solutions, providing basin-wide leadership to coordinate these competing factions has emerged as a particularly challenging task. There is no obvious source for the substantial funding that long-term solutions will require, and any such solutions could be subject to lengthy and contentious litigation by a variety of parties.

The Colorado Basin states and the federal government took an initial step toward addressing these challenges in the negotiations that produced the 2007 Colorado River Accord. In that process, the parties agreed on a set of rules for managing the river under low flow conditions, and for “banking” a limited quantity of water as a hedge against future shortages. In addition, the parties were able, through an informal consultation process, to tailor their final agreement to meet the concerns of certain environmental stakeholders who had a strong interest in the outcome of the negotiations, but lacked a formal seat at the table. But while the 2007 Accord is justifiably heralded as an accomplishment in addressing basin-scale challenges and involving non-governmental stakeholders, it provides at best a glimpse of the sustained effort that will be necessary to address the basin’s long-term water problems in an era of climate change.

The Colorado is far from the only large U.S. river basin facing challenges of this scale and complexity. In other such basins, collaborative initiatives that engage a broad range of stakeholders in management decisions have proved to be a valuable tool. Importantly, leaders have adopted these processes not only in the interest of being fair and equitable, but also because of the tangible benefits they can produce for all sides. For example, collaborative initiatives can:

- Resolve conflicts before they lead to litigation;
- Broaden public support for controversial solutions such as water infrastructure; and
- Help secure federal and state funding to implement solutions.

While the Colorado basin has a number of stakeholder collaboratives operating at a more local level, it has no existing process capable of producing these kinds of benefits on a basinwide scale.

Virtually every Colorado Basin leader interviewed for the recent Carpe Diem West report *Thinking Like a River Basin: Leaders' Perspectives on Options and Opportunities in Colorado River Management* recognized that a broader range of stakeholders wish to be more meaningfully engaged in river management discussions than current processes allow. Of course, not all agreed that broader engagement was feasible or desirable. But while it was clear these leaders understood the potential pitfalls of stakeholder engagement, it was less clear they were familiar with the practical benefits stakeholder processes can offer.

Carpe Diem West's leadership developed the current policy brief, *Governing Like a River Basin*, to provide the Colorado Basin water community with a look at the stakeholder engagement models in some other river basins and a discussion as to what those models might look like in the unique context of the Colorado River. This discussion is particularly relevant at a time when the Bureau of Reclamation's Basin Study is analyzing long-term solution sets for the Colorado. Devising comprehensive and effective solutions requires some kind of stakeholder participation. Moreover, few of these solutions could be implemented without broad public support and funding—precisely the kind of benefits that stakeholder models have helped produce elsewhere.

In short, there are ample reasons to consider broadening stakeholder involvement in Colorado River water decisions, despite the inevitable costs that come with such processes. What is needed is a thoughtful conversation about what kind of processes might be best suited to the particular challenges facing the Colorado Basin. The goal of this policy brief is to help start that conversation.

– The Carpe Diem West Team