

ENVIRONMENT*Courtesy National Park Service*

Aerial view of Boulder Basin, a recreational area on Lake Mead. The Gila River Indian Community has signed an agreement to preserve water in the Colorado River Basin and Lake Mead.

Gila River Indian Community Water Wins

Water rights advocate appointed to Arizona water board as Gila River tribe signs landmark Colorado River agreement

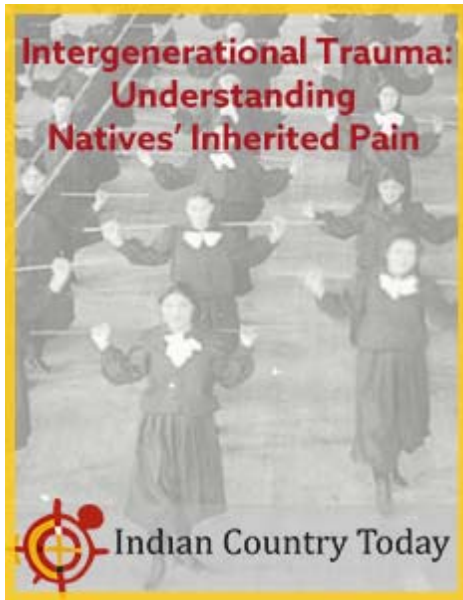
Debra Utacia Krol • March 21, 2017

The Gila River Indian Community celebrated twice on March 15: the appointment of one of the architects of its historic water rights settlement, Rodney Lewis, to the board of the Central Arizona Water Conservation District (CAWCD), and the tribe's signing of an agreement to continue efforts to conserve and store water during a 16-year drought in the Colorado River watershed.

The 14,000-member tribe formed a partnership with the Arizona Department of Water Resources (ADWR), the City of Phoenix and the Walton Family Foundation, a private philanthropic group with a vested interest in preserving the Colorado River basin, to cooperate on conservation and underground storage of Colorado River water. The partnership has two goals: support more efficient use of water, especially Arizona's allocation of Colorado River waters, and delay or even prevent drawing water from Lake Mead below 1,075 feet above sea level, or about 35 percent of capacity. That event would automatically trigger voluntary reductions in water taken from the lake by all lower basin users—Arizona, California, Nevada and Mexico.

In 2016, lake levels plunged to just three feet above the trigger level. Although this winter's rain and snowpack have helped swell reservoirs throughout the basin, water managers acknowledge that the allocation of water each entity is entitled to

exceeds what the Colorado can realistically supply in the wake of the prolonged drought. Alarmed, Colorado River water users began developing a new plan, the Drought Contingency Plan, to better manage the vital resource. According to a fact sheet released by ADWR, “the DCP proposes earlier and deeper reductions to Colorado River supplies for Arizona and Nevada beyond those agreed-upon limits.”



Intergenerational Trauma: Understanding Natives' Inherited Pain

Download our free report, *Intergenerational Trauma: Understanding Natives' Inherited Pain*, to understand this fascinating concept.

GET MY REPORT!

Another part of the plan involves expanding a current policy of “banking” water in underground storage, a plan known as intentionally created surplus; the stored water could be used to supplement other sources of water if Colorado River allocations are decreased. One such storage project is the Olberg Dam Underground Storage Facility, a riparian aquifer recharge project that both restores portions of the Gila River near Sacaton on the GRIC reservation and recharges the underground aquifer.

“This agreement is an important step to continue cooperative efforts to help slow the falling elevations at Lake Mead,” said Gila River Governor Stephen Roe Lewis in a statement. “Having the largest entitlement of Colorado River water delivered through the CAP system, the Community recognizes that it can make its supply available in times of need, and we consider this agreement a continuation of our commitments made to United States in January that will allow Arizona parties to continue their negotiations and efforts to conclude [the] comprehensive Drought Contingency Plan Plus to address the severe drought on the Colorado River.”

Stephen Lewis is also the son of Rodney Lewis, the Gila River community’s longtime tribal attorney and the chief architect

of the historic water agreement that reversed nearly a century of denying water rights to the tribe that can boast a thousand-year-plus history of clever agriculture. The Pima people consider themselves the descendants of the legendary Huhugam, who constructed the famed Phoenix canal system, and the Maricopa people also have a lengthy agricultural history.

The City of Phoenix hailed the agreement.

“Solving our most difficult long-term water challenges like the over-allocation of Colorado River water will require innovation and collaboration,” said Phoenix Mayor Greg Stanton. “Today we are embarking on a creative new way for the Gila River Indian Community, Phoenix and others to help build drought resiliency together to protect the Colorado and Lake Mead for the long run.”

“This agreement will allow for the creation of tools that will be effective in protecting Lake Mead,” said ADWR director Thomas Buschatzke. “Those tools will be enduring and inclusive, allowing for participation by a broad group of Arizona water entitlement holders and other constituencies.”

The Walton Family Foundation supplies both funding and capacity building for such projects.

“We have common goals in sustaining Colorado River systems,” said Ted Kowalski, who heads the foundation’s Colorado River Initiative. “Gila River Indian Community is a leader in this effort. We are proud to partner with these forward-thinking federal, state, tribal and local interests.”

Rodney Lewis’s appointment to the CAWCD board, which sets policy for the Central Arizona Project (CAP), the agency tasked with managing Arizona’s Colorado River allocation, was lauded by the entity’s leadership.

“Appointing Mr. Lewis to the CAP board shows great consideration by Gov. Doug Ducey, demonstrating the importance of tribal water interests in Arizona,” said CAP General Manager Ted Cooke. “Mr. Lewis brings a wealth of water knowledge and experience. It will be an honor to work with him.”

“My colleagues and I look forward to personally congratulating and welcoming Rod to the CAP Board at our next meeting,” said CAWCD board President Lisa Atkins. “Rod’s well-established and highly regarded expertise in water law is a welcome addition to the board, and I am delighted that we will have the opportunity to work together on critical policy issues, including water reliability for all Arizonans.”

Rodney Lewis said the water agreement took about a year to negotiate.

“When the drought became crucial, and it looked like a water shortage would be declared, we expedited the process,” he said. “It’s one step toward ensuring that Lake Mead wouldn’t drop below the shortage trigger level. That would really be devastating to farmers, cities and tribes.”

Lewis, Pima, shares his tribe’s farming heritage.

“The Pima and Maricopa have a long tradition of farming, and we have always been concerned with water,” Lewis said. “It feels gratifying to see that we are beginning to work together to solve our water issues. Indians and non-Indians have been distrustful of each other, but we are now beginning to work together to solve these mutual issues, and it’s a great honor to be part of the CAWCD board to help solve our water problems.”



Comments

Comments are closed.