

**Commentary: *Water Crisis Is Brewing, and the Colorado River Runs Through It***

**Imperial Valley had good cause to reject flawed plan.**

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Late Monday night, the Imperial Irrigation District defiantly rejected a proposed 75-year water sale to San Diego over the strong objections of the federal government. By the next morning, furious federal and state officials were already threatening to cut the state's water allotment dramatically.

This reaction was not justified. A transfer benefiting the rural valley and coastal city can still be attained, but patience and empathy are required.

The district's critics accuse it of casually ignoring the threatened reduction of urban California's Colorado River supply if the deal is not completed by Dec. 31. That charge is unfounded. The 3-2 vote bespeaks the hard choice facing Imperial Valley. Nor can the district's decision be labeled irresponsible. Despite displays of good faith and imagination by virtually all the participants, the Imperial Valley's fears are well founded.

The deal initially negotiated in 1998 by Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt and the Colorado River water users did not account for the transfer's effect on the Salton Sea, which could be harmed by a reduction in agricultural runoff from the Imperial Valley.

The 2002 revision emerging from the state Legislature and State Water Board maintained the sea for only 15 years. The actual 75-year transfer, however, would destroy an important habitat for endangered birds and fish and create a serious air pollution threat. To avoid those consequences would require the permanent retirement of productive farmland. The rural citizenry rightfully abhorred being forced to choose between its future environment and its economy.

Urban water consumers -- and Washington and Sacramento politicians -- must respect the Imperial Valley's well-founded fears. Moreover, we must all respect the valley's agricultural heritage. In becoming our nation's principal source of winter fruits and vegetables, the district's irrigated agriculture was created not by federal or state government but by pioneer families whose initiative and risk-taking turned the Colorado River to this productive use.

What can now be done?

Gov. Gray Davis and water officials still hope to broker a permanent deal by the Dec. 31 deadline. But such a quick fix probably is not possible. The Babbitt-sponsored agreement that quantifies how California may use the Colorado River must be reopened to include a permanent restoration of the Salton Sea. All California users, particularly those in the Coachella Valley, must lower their pre-2002 expectations for expanded water deliveries.

Our sister Colorado River states, with rightful claims that California confine its use to legal apportionment, must respect the sincere effort of all California agencies to reduce our draw on the Colorado River. But the greatest statesmanship must now emerge from Washington.

To date, Assistant Secretary of Interior Bennett Raley has chided and threatened California. His boss, the Interior secretary, is water master of the Lower Colorado and indeed has power to punish California -- but shouldn't.

Though the department is quick to remind us of our failure to live within our apportionment, it blatantly ignores its own missed congressional deadline for producing a Salton Sea restoration plan and protecting air quality at the sea and its responsibility to enforce Endangered Species Act compliance. Babbitt created the December 2002 deadline premised on a flawed plan; Interior Secretary Gale Norton must extend that deadline to correct the error she inherited. Norton should stop threatening and start cooperating in our common goal to find permanent peace on the river. #