

Mexico, US talking about Colorado River water

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LAS VEGAS -- A powerful Easter Sunday earthquake along the Mexico border has had ripple effects in Nevada, spurring international talks about future use of the Colorado River and the water level in Lake Mead.

United States and Mexico federal officials met recently at the Southern Nevada Water Authority office in Las Vegas to discuss water shortage and sharing agreements between the two nations.

Talks on the topic began in early 2008, but the 7.2 magnitude quake April 4 near Mexicali added urgency for Mexican officials because widespread damage to irrigation infrastructure might prevent that nation from using its full Colorado River allocation.

Mexico wants to use the vast Lake Mead reservoir behind Hoover Dam to store for future use some water it would usually draw from the river. It would tap that reserve once earthquake damage has been repaired, said Lorri Gray-Lee, director of the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation Lower Colorado River region. Gray-Lee's office administers Lake Mead, which serves as the primary drinking water source for Las Vegas, about 30 miles away.

Gray-Lee said she was optimistic an agreement could be struck by early next year on a broader agreement spelling out Mexico's share of any shortage that might be declared, and providing a framework for cross-border water exchanges.

"There's just too much benefit to both sides for us not to get this done," she said.

The Aug. 6 meeting in Las Vegas included Gray-Lee, Reclamation Commissioner Michael Connor, U.S. State Department representatives, and their Mexican counterparts.

Also on hand were top officials from the International Boundary and Water Commission, a bilateral panel that administers the boundary and water treaties between the two nations.

The next round of talks is slated for September, Gray-Lee said.

Southern Nevada Water Authority chief Pat Mulroy didn't directly participate in the meeting. But she said the talks took on a different tone after the earthquake.

"It created a situation in Mexico where they can't deliver water to their farms. The infrastructure is destroyed," she said. "I think they are a lot more serious to come to a conclusion."

The April 4 earthquake buckled canals and destroyed pipelines in a broad agricultural area south of Mexicali irrigated by water diverted from the Colorado River at the Morelos Dam west of Yuma, Ariz.

Roughly one-third of the Mexicali Valley suffered damage to its water infrastructure, said Jennifer McCloskey, area manager for the Bureau of Reclamation in Yuma.

Mulroy said Nevada might one day partner with Mexico by building an ocean desalting plant on the Mexican coast in exchange for being allowed to use a portion of Mexico's Colorado River

water. But she said no legal framework currently exists between the United States and Mexico for such exchanges.

Under a 1944 treaty, Mexico receives 1.5 million acre-feet of water a year from the Colorado River. California can draw 4.4 million acre feet, Arizona gets 2.8 million acre feet, and Nevada's share is 300,000 acre-feet. Colorado, New Mexico, Utah and Wyoming, the so-called upper basin states, also get shares of under the Colorado River Compact of 1922.

An acre-foot is enough to supply two average Las Vegas area homes for a year.

Depending on how much water is involved, Mulroy said both Nevada and Lake Mead could benefit if Mexico is allowed to store part of its river allocation in the reservoir.

Each 100,000 acre-feet of water adds about one foot to Lake Mead, and even a single foot could prove crucial as the lake level drops closer to a trigger point for a shortage declaration.

The reservoir level was 1,088 feet above sea level this week. At 1,075 feet, Nevada and Arizona will be forced to reduce their combined water use by 400,000 acre-feet a year.

Nevada's share of those shortages would start at 13,000 acre-feet, increase to 17,000 acre-feet, and then reach 20,000 acre-feet as Lake Mead continues to drop.

"How we stay above 1,075 is irrelevant as long as we stay above 1,075," Mulroy said.