

# Feds to study Western river basins

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The Bureau of Reclamation announced plans Thursday to study three large river basins in the West to get a better handle on future supplies, projected demands and the potential impacts of climate change on water resources.

Reclamation Commissioner Michael Connor made the announcement while in New Mexico for a meeting of stakeholders from throughout the Colorado River basin, which is one of the basins that will be studied over the next two years as part of the agency's conservation initiative.

Studies also will be done on the Yakima River basin in Washington and the Milk and St. Mary River systems in Montana.

"We recognize that we need to get a better understanding of how climate change may impact water resources," Connor told The Associated Press during a telephone interview. "Really this is the first stage of gathering this information."

As part of the studies, the agency will develop projections for supply and demand throughout the basins and analyze how each basin's existing infrastructure and operations will perform in the face of changing conditions, including shifting precipitation patterns, temperature increases and growing demand.

Connor said endangered species will also be considered as the agency plans for future water needs.

The studies also will make recommendations on how the agency can improve management in the basins, including dam operations and restoration efforts, to ensure there are adequate supplies in the future.

The Bureau of Reclamation is providing half of the funding for the studies. Participating state, tribal and local agencies will cover the rest.

Of the three studies, the Yakima basin is the most expensive, \$2.6 million. The agency said \$2 million will be spent on the Colorado basin and \$700,000 will go toward the Montana project.

The agency also has made a funding request of about \$4 million to study more basins next year.

The basin study program is competitive. Connor said his office received more than two dozen letters of interest that represented nearly \$10 million in funding requests.

The proposals of the three basins to be studied first had the most promise to yield the best information, Connor said, pointing specifically to the Colorado River.

"The implications of climate change in the Colorado River basin are probably more significant than any other river basin," he said.

Different scientists have produced models forecasting the future flow of the Colorado, and all predict less water. The river flows for more than 1,400 miles and serves millions of people in Arizona, California, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, Wyoming and Utah.

While the studies progress, Connor said the Bureau of Reclamation will continue with projects aimed at conserving the West's water.

"We know whatever the impacts, better water management and more efficient use on the ground is going to help address these ultimate scenarios," he said.