Media Contact: Kip White: 202-513-0684 Frank Quimby: 202-208-7291
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Secretary of the Interior Gale Norton today officially signed the Colorado River Water Delivery Agreement, a landmark pact that begins a new era of cooperation on the river by fulfilling a promise California made more than 70 years ago.

"This Agreement marks a historic turning point for California and the Colorado River Basin States," Norton said after signing the pact with officials of four California water agencies. "The economy and well-being of a large part of the growing West rely on critical agreements, such as this one, that allocate Colorado River water, provide assurances of long-term supplies, and clear the way for market-based transfers and other tools that are essential to meet the growing water needs of the region."

Under Norton's leadership as Secretary of the Interior, California has agreed to take specific, incremental steps that will reduce its over-reliance on Colorado River water in the next 14 years, allowing the state to live within its authorized annual share of 4.4 million acre-feet. The Agreement allows the six other Colorado River Basin States to protect their authorized shares to meet future needs.

Federal, state and local officials from the Colorado River Basin States joined Norton for the signing of the pact at Hoover Dam. Norton said the venue was particularly appropriate, noting that "in 1928 Congress required California to 'irrevocably and unconditionally' agree to limit its annual use of Colorado River water to 4.4.million acre-feet, making the state's assent a condition for building this magnificent keystone of the lower Colorado River distribution system. Without California's 1929 promise, there would be no Hoover Dam."

Though California agreed to this limitation in 1929, the state has been drawing extra or surplus water from the river for the past several decades, leaving its promise to the other Colorado River Basin States and the Federal Government unfulfilled. The key to meeting California's commitment was dividing the state's 4.4 million acre-foot share among its southern farming and urban communities.

The Agreement signed today is that long-sought quantification - the Federal Quantification Settlement Agreement - that enables California to meet the needs of its citizens, urban and rural, in a manner that respects the rights of other Colorado River Basin States.

The framework to implement the quantification agreement was reached after years of difficult negotiations. In late 2000, California, the other six Basin States, and the Department of the Interior agreed on this framework, known as the Interim Surplus Guidelines. The Guidelines provided California with a choice as to how it would reduce its over-reliance on the waters of the Colorado River.

If the state met all of the Guidelines' benchmarks, it would continue to have access to extra water during the transition to its 4.4 million acre-foot limit. If California failed to meet a benchmark, it would immediately lose access to that extra water. Despite the efforts of many local, state and federal officials, California failed to meet the first major benchmark under the Interim Surplus Guidelines on Dec. 31,2002, and automatically lost its access to the extra Colorado River water.

Since then, negotiations among the four California water agencies, the Department, and representatives of all seven Colorado River Basin States have continued, and all parties worked through an astounding series of difficult issues. "But they persevered," Norton said, "and as a result of the hard work, dedication, and persistence of those negotiators, we are here today to celebrate a success for the Colorado River."

By executing this pact, California regains the right to access extra Colorado water over 14 years, easing its gradual reduction and lessening pressure on Northern California to send more water south. By reallocating the state's share, California also will be able to provide water for its growing cities and address the environmental concerns of the Salton Sea. The Agreement also allows farming communities in Southern California to strengthen their economies through water efficiency projects, canal modernization, conservation, and water marketing.

"For the Basin States, the Agreement provides certainty, allowing them to protect their authorized allocations and meet their future water needs," Norton emphasized. "As part of this agreement, and in reliance on the promises made in the agreement, I have fully reinstated the Interim Surplus Guidelines," Norton declared.

That will allow Nevada, which lost access to extra water from the Colorado River along with California, to again have access to this water and return to the long-term path it has developed to meet the needs of its growing population.

The Agreement also provides the critical water supply necessary to resolve the water rights claims of the La Jolla, Pala, Pauma, Rincon, and San Pasqual Bands of Mission Indians. "Because of the hard work, dedication, and persistence of local, state and federal negotiators over the past nine months as well as over the last decade, we are here today to execute the hard-won fruits of these Herculean labors," Norton said. "With this agreement, conflict on the river is stilled."

"To the countless people who worked long hours, sacrificed weekends away from family and sat down in good faith to make today's agreement a reality, I thank you," Norton said.. "People throughout the West thank you; and future generations in the Colorado River Basin - from the headwaters to the Lower Basin -- will enjoy the benefits of your success." Norton said the agreement also demonstrates "what can be accomplished by working cooperatively -- despite seemingly insurmountable obstacles -- and by using innovative approaches to find solutions to the water supply challenges facing communities across the West."

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