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## Program targets health of river species Southern Nevada may contribute \$80 million

**By Launce Rake**  
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Southern Nevada is preparing to make a nearly \$80 million contribution to the environmental health of the lower Colorado River.

The board of the Southern Nevada Water Authority will vote on a proposal Thursday to put the money into a "multi-species habitat conservation program" for the river. The conservation program, years in development, is a federal and state partnership targeting 26 species for protection.

The Nevada agency would join water agencies in Arizona and California in financially supporting the conservation program, which is slated to cost more than \$626 million over the next 50 years. The program is aimed at easing, if not eliminating, conflicts between protecting the habitats of the rare animal species and humans who are increasingly thirsty for Colorado River water.

Interior Secretary Gale Norton is scheduled to sign the pact into law during a ceremony April 4 at Hoover Dam. The federal government is committing to pay for half of the plan's costs.

Kay Brothers, Southern Nevada Water Authority deputy general manager, said the contribution of the water authority and its sister agency, Nevada's Colorado River Commission, was set in the pact at \$78 million in 2003 dollars.

Water agencies from California, Arizona and the federal Bureau of Reclamation, which oversees the river system, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which is charged with protecting the fish, animals and vegetation habitats along the river, joined state fish and game agencies, tribal governments and others to draft the plan. Talks that led to the creation of the program began in the early 1990s.

One group that participated in the early talks pulled out in 1998, and continues to express strong concerns about the program.

"In general, the water agencies want to manage the river like a zoo, while biologists, conservationists and fishermen want to manage the river like a river," David Hogan, a representative of the national environmental group the Center for Biological Diversity, said to the program's developmental steering committee before his group pulled out.

He said the priorities in the plan are upside down. The need is to restore the river to its natural condition, including restoration of the river's delta in Mexico.

"Real river conservation won't be achieved by prioritizing water deliveries to developers and agribusiness over other important values," Hogan said. "Raising endangered fish in hatcheries and dumping them in stagnant reservoirs doesn't make for a healthy river."

Perhaps the biggest problem with the plan is that local water agencies and

the Interior Department promise about \$11 million annually for river habitat conservation, but there is no guarantee that the money will come, he said. What is guaranteed to continue is exploitation of the river for human needs.

"The program has a lot of lofty promises but very few conservation guarantees, especially when it comes to funding. Meanwhile, the agencies are receiving very real assurances that their harmful activities can continue indefinitely."

Representatives of those local and federal agencies disagree.

Lesley Fitzpatrick, a biologist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service working out of Phoenix, said the pact represents a milestone in the protection of both wildlife and the human communities, such as Las Vegas, that depend on the Colorado River.

The conservation plan means that water and power from the river will continue to be available in the coming decades, she said.

"It's going to provide certainty for water users and power users," she said. "This will allow future water transfers and ongoing water use."

"We're also gaining a tremendous amount of benefit for the species through the creation of habitat, 8,132 acres of habitat."

Habitat that will be preserved or recreated along about 700 miles of the river south of Lake Powell include areas of cottonwood willows and mesquite

trees, marshes, and backwater areas that can be critical for spawning fish and other species, Fitzpatrick said.

The work over the next five decades should help mitigate perhaps the most dramatic impact of human intervention on the river, she said. Before dams created lakes Powell and Mead as huge reservoirs for human use, floods and droughts regularly created, sustained and destroyed beaches and other habitats along the river.

"Because the river flow is completely controlled, you don't have the 'restart' action through floods and droughts," Fitzpatrick said. The conservation program will help recreate what she called the normal aging process of the river.

"The 26 species on the list are the focus, and we're providing specific benefits for them, but pretty much every species along the river will receive some benefit."

Kathleen Blair, a Fish and Wildlife Service ecologist with the Bill Williams River National Wildlife Refuge, was involved in some of the discussions more than a decade ago that led to the conservation plan. She said the plan will help prevent animals from becoming endangered in the coming years and ultimately will save the region's governments from having to launch new recovery efforts.

"Preventive maintenance is a lot cheaper in the long run," Blair said. "With habitat conservation, we can keep a lot of them (species) from getting into trouble."

Thousands of species, she noted, live in the habitats along the Lower Colorado River Basin.

"It's one of the largest habitat conservation programs implemented in the United States," Blair said.

The importance of the pact and habitat conservation will only grow in the coming decades, she predicted.

"The Colorado is not making more water but we're certainly making more people."

On Feb. 8, the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, which uses Colorado River water to help supply about 20 million people, committed more than \$88 million to the program. Other California agencies will contribute \$69 million more over the next 50 years.

Water district board chairman Wes Bannister said the importance of the program was that it protect the Golden State's access to the river water in the future. Protecting the species would be critical to avoiding legal pitfalls in taking water or changing the way that California uses river water in the future, he said.

"Instead of a piecemeal, species by species approach, this multispecies program proactively addresses endangered species issues that threaten water supplies throughout the West," Bannister said. "We're partnering with federal and state agencies, as well as other water and power users on a program that helps listed species recover and takes action to prevent other species from becoming threatened or endangered."

The California action came a day after the Central Arizona Project board, representing Arizona's largest water agency, gave similar approval to its \$60 million commitment.

Brothers, with the Southern Nevada Water Authority, said the fact that agencies from three states and the federal government can agree on the environmental program was significant.

"This is something that is a huge example of what you can do when you cooperate," she said. "It's really a huge success for the lower basin entities that did this."