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[Glennon and Culp: West must strive for water sustainability](#)

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by [Robert Glennon and Peter Culp](#) - Jan. 5, 2013 12:00 AM

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For more than a century, solving the West's water challenges has involved building new dams, pipelines and canals to "make the desert bloom."

Supported by a vast reservoir of federal dollars, the so-called Reclamation Era defined the character of the modern West, with its sprawling cities and agricultural empires. That era ended on Dec. 12, when the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation released the "Colorado River Basin Water Demand and Supply Study," a landmark report that gives the 40 million inhabitants of the Colorado River basin a glimpse of a very different future.

Developed in collaboration with water managers in the seven Colorado River Basin states, the study relies on thousands of hours of sophisticated computer modeling, more than a hundred years' worth of meticulous stream flow measurements, and the results of 16 different global climate models developed by leading scientists.

The story it tells is one that the American West needs to hear. It starts with the recognition that the human demands on the Colorado River already substantially exceed the naturally-available water supply. What's more, without a significant change in course in the coming decades, demands on the Colorado River will exceed supply by an average of 25 percent - some 3.2 million acre-feet. That's about eight times the amount of water used each year by Las Vegas.

This message -- the once-radical idea that the American West cannot continue on its present course -- is coming not from environmentalists and academics, but from the West's professional water managers. Even more surprising is what they recommend that we do about it.

Of the 160 different solutions that the study considered to close the gap between supply and demand, only a dozen or so involved business-as-usual proposals for major new infrastructure to dam, divert, and transport water in defiance of nature. The study found none of these ideas to be cost effective in comparison to the enormous potential for water savings from agricultural, industrial, and urban water conservation, increased reuse, local desalinization, and other "soft path" strategies to manage our water resources more flexibly.

For a century, the Bureau of Reclamation worked to build an unrivaled network of water infrastructure. With this study, that same agency has embraced a very different task: helping the West to find a path to sustainability in the midst of growing scarcity.

Equally significant is the study's groundbreaking embrace of the reality of climate change. Despite the strident voices of conspiracy theorists and climate-change deniers, Western water managers accept that the Earth is changing -- and so is the West. The study predicts major declines in basin-wide precipitation and runoff that will add to the already

documented and growing impacts of dust on snow, invasive species, and rising temperatures. Under worst-case scenarios, the demand could exceed supply by as much as 50 percent within the next 50 years.

In the midst of this historic change, it is unfortunate that some conflict-seeking media have focused their attention on a proposal for a new pipeline to bring water from the Missouri River -- a proposal that epitomizes the grandiose works of the Reclamation Era. The study found that this "solution" was among the least cost effective. It ranked near the bottom, along with other extravagant concepts like towing icebergs or giant bags of water from Alaska -- a fantasy in a post-recession West facing a future with shrinking federal support and budget-challenged state governments.

The study's basic message is unadorned: Without meaningful changes in our approach to water in the West, the water supply for our arid civilization may prove to be a mirage, not an oasis. The Bureau of Reclamation's call to action is not for more of the endless pipelines frequently advocated by the right, nor for the embrace of the dams-be-damned positions often advocated by the left. It is for more cooperation and collaboration, and a broadened dialogue that engages the Colorado River's stakeholders to embrace a modern river management philosophy that works to serve the needs of the basin's people and its ecosystems.



The Bureau of Reclamation is telling us that the Reclamation Era is over. We should listen.

Robert Glennon is a regents' professor at the University of Arizona and author of "Unquenchable: America's Water Crisis and What To Do About It." Peter Culp is a partner in the Phoenix office of Squire Sanders where he manages the firm's Western water and natural resources practice.

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