



December 22, 2008 | 8 comments

How the West's Energy Boom Could Threaten Drinking Water for 1 in 12 Americans

A rush to develop domestic oil, gas and uranium deposits along the Colorado River and its tributaries threatens its future

By [Abraham Lustgarten](#) and [ProPublica](#)



MINE FIELD: The Dome Plateau area has attracted oil, gas and uranium mining interest. This photo was taken within America's Red Rock Wilderness, in an area the Bureau of Land Management has also acknowledged as wilderness quality. © SCOTT BRADEN/SUWA

The Colorado River, the life vein of the Southwestern United States, is in trouble.

The river's water is hoarded the moment it trickles out of the mountains of Wyoming and Colorado and begins its 1,450-mile journey to Mexico's border. It runs south through seven states and the Grand Canyon, delivering water to Phoenix, Los Angeles and San Diego. Along the way, it powers homes for 3 million people, nourishes 15 percent of the nation's crops and provides drinking water to one in 12 Americans.

Now a rush to develop domestic oil, gas and uranium deposits along the river and its tributaries threatens its future.

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The region could contain more oil than Alaska's National Arctic [Wildlife](#) Refuge. It has the richest natural gas fields in the country. And nuclear energy, viewed as a key solution to the nation's dependence on foreign energy, could use the uranium deposits held there.

But getting those resources would suck up vast quantities of the river's water and could pollute what is left. That's why those most concerned are water managers in places like Los Angeles and San Diego. They have the most to lose.

The river is already so beleaguered by drought and [climate](#) change that one environmental study called it the nation's "most endangered" waterway. Researchers from the Scripps Institution of [Oceanography](#) warn the river's reservoirs could dry up in 13 years.

The industrial push has already begun.

In the eight years George W. Bush has been in office, the Colorado River watershed has seen more oil and gas drilling than at any time in the past 25 years. Uranium claims have reached a 10-year high. Last week the departing administration auctioned off an additional 148,598 acres of federal land for gas drilling projects outside Moab, Utah.

As still more land is leased for drilling and a last-minute change in federal rules has paved the way for water-intensive oil shale mining, politicians and water managers are now being forced to ask which is more valuable: energy or water.

"The decisions we are making today will be dictating how we will be living the rest of our lives," said Jim Pokrandt, a spokesman with the Colorado River Conservation District, a state-run policy agency. "We may have reached mutually exclusive demands on our water supply."

Some experts and officials say the economic and ecological importance of the Colorado is just as vital to American security as the natural resources that can be extracted from around it.

"Without (the Colorado), there is no Western United States," said Jim Baca, who directed the Bureau of Land Management, or BLM, in the Clinton administration and says the agency's current policy is narrow-sighted. "If it becomes unusable, you move the entire Western United States out of any sort of economic position for growth."

Balancing that risk with the need for energy is complicated, because scientific understanding of the Colorado is limited and no single agency manages the river as a national resource.

The Interior Department, which includes the BLM, oversees where the water goes, but not how it is kept clean. The EPA is charged with maintaining water quality, but it can't control who uses it and doesn't conduct its own research. Furthermore, the EPA delegates much of its authority to the states that the river runs through, and the federal, state and local authorities in charge of separate aspects of the river don't always coordinate or cooperate.

"I don't know that there is, quite honestly, anyone that looks at an entire overview impact statement of the Colorado River," said Robert Walsh, a spokesman for the Bureau of Reclamation, which governs the allocation and flow of the southern part of the waterway.

Oil and natural gas drilling in Colorado already require so much water that if its annual demand were satisfied all at once, it would be the equivalent of shutting off most of Southern California's water for five days. If Colorado's oil shale is mined, it would turn off the spigot for 79 days.

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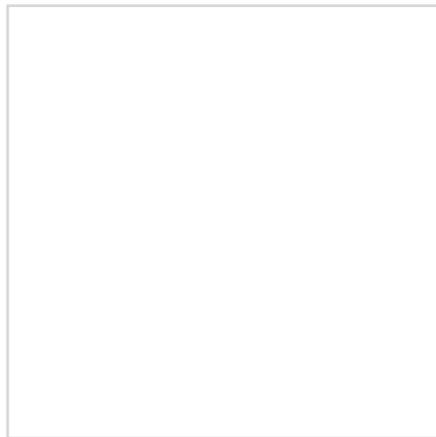
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