Drought, scarcity, climate change, and Colorado's water future

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Abstract

Early explorers did not consider Colorado as a place for settlement due to its aridity, but innovative patterns of water development overcame this limitation and enabled population growth to nearly six million people, with more to come. A combination of inter-mountain water transfers, construction of storage reservoirs, and water management was based on a relatively stable water economy facilitated by a unique and court-based first-in-time, first-in-rights water law system. To resolve conflicts with neighboring states, a series of interstate compacts was developed. Now, a series of interstate and intrastate agreements has created a water management environment that will be tested by climate change, deep drought, population growth, and regulations to span a range of interests. The presentation will explain the present water management framework, the stress points that are exposed by drought, the local, state, interstate, and federal actions underway to address the issues, and the likely trajectories of major water supply initiatives in the state. Issues of water management on the Colorado River will be explained in the context of interstate and federal actions. The presentation will conclude with a summary of opportunities for policy entrepreneurship, research, and new educational programs to respond to the emerging water management environment.