

**Babbitt signs historic 7-state water accord**

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**Abstract:**

A historic agreement signed by Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt in Coronado yesterday virtually guarantees San Diego County conserved water from Imperial Valley farms as part of a sweeping plan to end California's overuse of Colorado River water.

About 200,000 acre-feet of conserved irrigation water from the Imperial Valley -- about one-third as much water as San Diego County uses each year -- will begin flowing to San Diego County later this decade. An acre-foot is 326,000 gallons, about enough to serve the domestic needs of two families of four for one year.

1 PIC | 1 1. Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt talked with Pat Mulroy and Tom Levy of the Coachella Valley Water District at yesterday's Colorado River agreement signing in Coronado. 2. Water entitlements -- Basic entitlements on the Colorado River, by state, in acre-feet. California is the only state that uses more than its basic entitlement, about 5.3 million acre-feet. (A-12); Credit: 1. Nancee E. Lewis / Union-Tribune 2. SOURCES: San Diego County Water Authority; Knight Ridder/Tribune | DAVID HARDMAN / Union-Tribune

**Full Text:**

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A historic agreement signed by Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt in Coronado yesterday virtually guarantees San Diego County conserved water from Imperial Valley farms as part of a sweeping plan to end California's overuse of Colorado River water.

The seven-state accord assures Southern California enough river water for 15 years while the state's water agencies install conservation and transfer projects to cut reliance on the river by about 17 percent.

Without the pact, completed after five years of negotiations, officials feared that a new era of limits on the Southwest's largest water source could result in continuing legal and political conflict.

"I think we have reached the end of a century of trying to solve water problems by going to

war," said Babbitt, addressing a buoyant audience of 120 water and government officials in a Coronado ceremony.

"I never thought we would get here," Babbitt said in his last public appearance as interior secretary. "It seemed absolutely improbable, bordering on impossible."

By signing the agreement, Babbitt gives public water agencies in the Southwest and Rocky Mountains what private electrical utilities in California lack -- assured long-term supplies and predictable rates while basic reform is undertaken.

"This is a historic event in which all seven river states have come together," said Maureen Stapleton, general manager of the San Diego County Water Authority. An April 1998 water-transfer agreement between the authority and the Imperial Irrigation District is a key element of California's conservation campaign.

About 200,000 acre-feet of conserved irrigation water from the Imperial Valley -- about one-third as much water as San Diego County uses each year -- will begin flowing to San Diego County later this decade. An acre-foot is 326,000 gallons, about enough to serve the domestic needs of two families of four for one year.

"For San Diego, it means your growth future is assured if you use water wisely," Babbitt said. "In order for California to comply with the agreement, the (Imperial to San Diego) water transfer has to go forward."

Under the agreement, the Imperial Irrigation District -- long criticized for overuse of river water -- has a cap on its yearly use for the first time.

Water conservation procedures and equipment will enable valley growers to raise the same crops with less water, with the irrigation district selling the conserved water to San Diego County to pay for the conservation works.

"We know what we have to do to make it work, and we'll make it work," said Lloyd Allen, a member of the irrigation district board.

James Turner, chairman of the water authority board, said of Babbitt: "We feel very good about him coming here and recognizing that our water transfer agreement is a big part of this plan."

California's basic entitlement to Colorado River water is 4.4 million acre-feet, but it has used more than 5 million acre-feet annually in recent years -- the only river state to exceed its basic entitlement.

Water leaders in the other six states have worried that California had committed its excess water use to serve new population growth and might unlimber its vast political power to keep taking more, stunting growth in smaller river states.

For five years, Babbitt has prodded California officials to address the use of river water. More recently, he has pressured officials of other river states to give the Golden State a chance to use river water more wisely.

"We are confident that the consensus that has been reached will achieve the results" of lowering California's thirst back to 4.4 million acre-feet, said Philip Mutz, New Mexico's commissioner on the Upper Colorado River Commission.

If California does not keep pace with conservation goals in the agreement, it can be voided, he said.

"The six other states sense a commitment in California they haven't sensed before to go and fix this problem," said Mike Madigan, who led the San Diego County Water Authority through the bleak days of the 1987-92 drought, when only Colorado River supplies prevented crippling shortages.

"If we don't move smartly along the path of solving things, we will have accomplished nothing and we will be back into litigation," Madigan said. "This is a big deal. It's important."

The pact also assures the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, San Diego County's only supplier of imported water, that it can continue to keep its 242-mile Colorado River Aqueduct full of water imports from the Colorado River.

"This agreement allows for a 15-year transition period. It guarantees rate stability and supply stability," said Dennis Underwood, senior executive assistant to the MWD's general manager.

"This will be the first time on the Colorado River System that any entity will limit its supply. We will irrigate the same acreage of agriculture but use less water."

MWD imports water from the Colorado River as well as from Northern California rivers via the 444-mile California Aqueduct, a state installation.

San Diego County receives from 75 percent to more than 95 percent of its water from MWD, depending on local rainfall. San Diego County consumers will continue to depend heavily on MWD water imports even after water transfers from the Imperial Valley become a reality.

California's water conservation initiatives also include a \$235 million program -- to be financed by California voters who approved a 1998 water bond issue -- to line two large irrigation canals in the Imperial Valley that now have earthen floors and leak millions of gallons each year.

The MWD was the first to finance water conservation projects in the Imperial Valley and receive the water it saved.

So-called surplus water to supply California water districts over the next 15 years will come partly from the more than 50 million acre-feet of water -- more than 10 years' supply at the state's rate of over-consumption -- in storage behind the Colorado River's federal dams.