

Opening Statement of Ranking Member Tom McClintock
House Natural Resources Committee
Sub-committee on Water, Oceans and Wildlife
March 28, 2019

The Sub-committee meets today to consider the Colorado Drought Contingency Plan, agreed to by all of the states that draw from the Colorado River Basin.

The dams on the Colorado have been the foundation of the prosperity of the Western states that rely on them to store water from wet years to assure abundance in dry ones. Forty million people and 5 ½ million acres of productive farmland now depend on the water stored behind these dams and the approximately 4,200 megawatts of hydroelectricity their turbines generate.

Both natural and man-made developments have brought us to this juncture.

The first is the continuing drought in the American Southwest. Precipitation in most of the continental United States has increased considerably since the turn of the last century -- almost 2/10ths of an inch per decade. The exception is the Southwest, which has seen a decrease in precipitation in the same period as weather patterns have shifted.

In addition, the original allocations of Colorado River water were set back in 1922, during a period of unusually high precipitation, thus building into the system an overestimate of available system-wide supply. In addition, the release of water to meet environmental laws in recent years has further drained our reservoirs, compounding the shortages imposed by drought.

As Yogi Bera famously observed, "Predictions are difficult, especially when they involve the future." The good news is that the Upper Colorado Snowpack is currently 128 percent of normal for the year. February precipitation was well above the 30-year median, double in most places, and this month is likely to be the wettest March on record in the Colorado Basin. But that is no guarantee the drought is over, and prudence and experience both warn us of the need to be prepared. And one thing is absolutely certain about the future of the Colorado River Basin: demand for water will continue to increase with population, while the supply of water will continue to fluctuate. That is the fine point of the matter and an inescapable reality we cannot ignore.

It is a remarkable development that seven of the most politically diverse states in the nation could find agreement on something as controversial as decreased water allocations, but that miracle is before us today. I think we would be well-advised to show a little humility and defer to the judgment of the states that directly depend on the water allocations set forth in this contingency plan.

During the miracle at Philadelphia, Benjamin Franklin observed that the principle difference between the Catholic and Protestant religions was that the Catholics believed their church is infallible while the Protestants believed that their church is never wrong. His advice to

them that day – which I believe is entirely applicable here – is that we should each doubt a little of our own infallibility and in this case, approve this compact.