

Milestones in Colorado River Delta History



Pre-1500 Cucapá inhabit the original delta environment, a vast riparian, freshwater, brackish and tidal wetland covering nearly two million acres.

1540 Hernando de Alarcon ventures up the “River of Good Guidance” as far as present-day Yuma, becoming the first European to set foot in the Colorado River Delta.



1848 The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo ends the Mexican War. The signing of the treaty and the addition of land in the Gadsden Purchase five years later creates the current international boundary between the United States and Mexico.

1922 The father of wildlife management, Aldo Leopold, canoes the delta, later writing his moving essay “Green Lagoons” that describes the pristine environment he encountered and feared would soon disappear.

Colorado River Compact is signed at Bishop’s Lodge, Santa Fe, New Mexico, allocating 7.5 million acre-feet (maf) of water to the Upper Basin states (Utah, Wyoming, Colorado, New Mexico) and an equal amount to the Lower Basin states (Nevada, California, Arizona); a potential allocation was recognized for Mexico.

1935 Hoover Dam is completed. No water reaches the delta for six years, as Lake Mead fills.

1944 The U.S.-Mexico Water Treaty is ratified, guaranteeing Mexico 1.5 maf and up to an additional 200,000 acre-feet of surplus, and establishing the International Boundary and Water Commission to manage transborder resources. Since this time, Mexico has dedicated its allocation to agriculture.

Map reproduced courtesy of University of Arizona Library Special Collections: Ehrenberg, Herman. Map of The Gadsden Purchase: Sonora and Portions of New Mexico, Chihuahua, and California. Cincinnati, OH: Middleton, Stonebridge & Co. Lithographers, 1858.

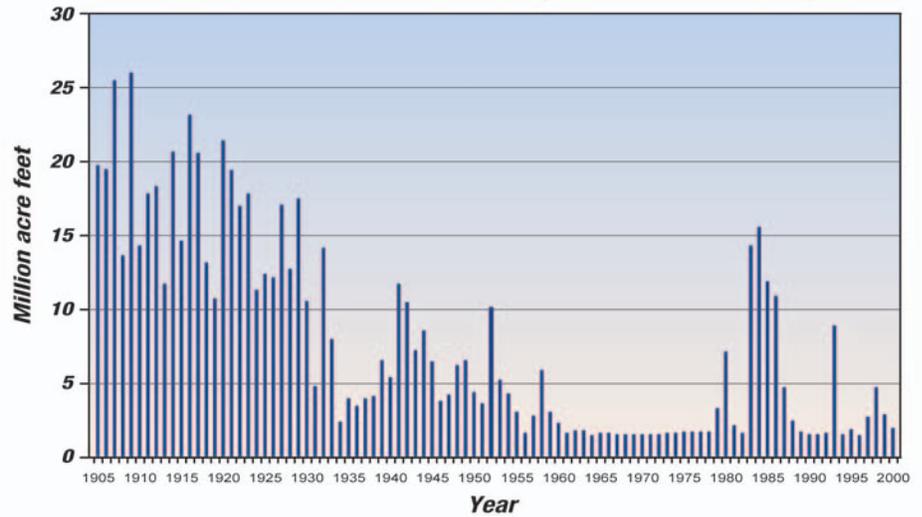
1963 The Glen Canyon Dam is completed and for 18 years as Lake Powell fills, no water reaches the delta. Loss of fresh water and the conversion of uplands and marshes to agricultural lands diminish the delta wetlands to about 5 percent of their original extent.

The U.S. Supreme Court formally allocates the Lower Basin's share of Colorado River water between Arizona at 2.8 maf, California at 4.4 maf, and Nevada at 0.3 maf.

1972 Minute 242 is added to the 1944 Treaty, establishing salinity standards for water delivered to Mexico.

1979 Wellton-Mohawk Irrigation District water begins flowing to Mexico, eventually establishing the 40,000-acre Ciénega de Santa Clara.

Historical flows of the Colorado River below all major dams and diversions, 1905-2000



2003 A federal court rejects *Defenders of Wildlife v. Norton*, finding that the Department of Interior lacks the authorization to apply the Endangered Species Act to impacts of water deliveries to Mexico.

The Quantification Settlement Agreement is signed by California water users, setting the stage for gradual reduction of the state's overuse of Colorado River water, imposing the Interim Surplus Criteria, and leading to the lining of the All-American Canal.

U.S. Congress authorizes funding for operation of the Yuma Desalination Plant, placing the Ciénega de Santa Clara in jeopardy.

The Cucupá Indian Tribe proposes the establishment of an international conservation area in the Limitrophe section of the Colorado River.

The Mexican government proposes projects to permanently fix the international border and increase flood capacity in the riparian corridor.

Information for milestones contributed by Steve Cornelius – Sonoran Institute

Art work by Brad James

1983 El Niño event causes massive flooding of the Gila River, stimulating revegetation of the Colorado River riparian zone.

1992 Yuma Desalination Plant is completed at a cost of \$225 million, but never operated.

1993 Mexico establishes the Upper Gulf of California and Colorado River Delta Biosphere Reserve to protect two million acres of riparian, wetland, and coastal marine habitat.

2000 Minute 306 is added to the 1944 Treaty, providing a conceptual framework for riparian and estuarine ecosystem management of the delta.