

Interior head signs Navajo water deal

by **Cristina Silva** - Dec. 18, 2010 12:00 AM
Associated Press

LAS VEGAS - Ten of thousands of Navajos will finally enjoy running water in their homes under a national settlement that quantifies the tribe's water rights in the lower Colorado River basin, Interior Secretary Ken Salazar said Friday.

Salazar and Navajo Nation President Joe Shirley Jr. signed the San Juan Navajo Water Rights Settlement during the Colorado River Water Users Association annual conference in Las Vegas.

The agreement attempts to resolve a 142-year-old dispute. The completed legislation recognizes about 600,000 acre-feet per year that would go to the Navajos for agriculture, industrial, municipal, domestic and stock watering purposes.

An acre-foot is the amount of water needed to cover an acre of land with 1 foot of water. About 326,000 gallons, an acre-foot can meet the annual water needs of up to two U.S. households.

Government officials say it will provide a long-term clean-water supply that will improve health conditions on the reservation and pave the way for future economic development in northwestern New Mexico.

"Because of these settlements now, we are going to bring water into the dwellings of my people," Shirley said.

Salazar said the contract will transform the lives of people who often must haul water to their homes in truck beds.

He also announced that negotiations to store Mexico's water supply at the vast Lake Mead reservoir will continue this weekend in Mexico City.

A powerful April earthquake along the border destroyed that country's infrastructure, and Mexico wants to use the reservoir behind Hoover Dam to store water it would usually draw from the river. It would tap that reserve once the earthquake damage has been repaired.

"Mexico does not have capacity to store its water," Salazar said. "The concept is that the water would stay here in the United States, so we would temporarily be storing it for Mexico."

Mexico receives 1.5 million acre-feet of water a year from the Colorado River under a 1944 treaty. California can draw 4.4 million acre-feet; Arizona gets 2.8 million acre-feet; and Nevada's share is 300,000 acre-feet.

The so-called upper basin states - Colorado, New Mexico, Utah and Wyoming - also get shares under the Colorado River Compact of 1922.

Salazar said declining water levels at the Hoover Dam and along the Colorado River signal future troubles, but urged states to work together to prepare for the future.

"This has been the driest 11-year period in the 122-year historical record for the Colorado River basin," he said. "The countless communities that rely on the river to sustain them are being forced to make tough choices."

Salazar said years of conflict between the states and the federal government over water rights have already matured into working partnerships.

"We must not recreate those water wars of the last century," he added.

The Navajo settlement will direct water from New Mexico's share of the river to the tribe.

New Mexico and the tribe signed the agreement in 2005, but Congress had to enact legislation to implement the settlement. The bill initially stalled over concern for the nearly \$900 million price tag.

The series of water lines that are expected to deliver clean water to 80,000 residents on the eastern side of the reservation aren't complete.

Proponents say the lack of potable water has made it nearly impossible for many Navajos to pass the poverty level. Critics say the Navajo Nation would receive a large amount of water to serve a small population.

Read more:

<http://www.azcentral.com/news/articles/2010/12/18/20101218coloradoriverwater1218.html#ixzz18TTVyxig>

The Water Conservation Alliance of Southern Arizona (Water CASA) was established in 1997 to promote the efficient use of water in the region. It is an alliance of Southern Arizona water providers working to enhance the public's awareness and understanding of conservation issues, methods, and practices.