

Drought, Possibly Worst in 500 Years, Threatens Water Supply

By Laurence Rake, Las Vegas Sun

The dropping level of Lake Mead could require an investment of at least “several hundred million dollars” to keep water coming to Las Vegas, water officials said Thursday. Lake levels are dropping and may soon fall below pump intake levels.

The cause is the drought plaguing the West and the Rocky Mountains, the worst, say scientists studying tree rings, in more than 500 years. The drought threatens to effectively empty Lake Mead’s upstream reservoir, Lake Powell, within a few years, at which point Lake Mead will begin to “drop like a stone,” Southern Nevada Water Authority General Manager Pat Mulroy has warned.

Lake Mead is at 1,128 feet above sea level, down more than 85 feet from where it was four years ago. It now holds only 55 percent of its capacity. Lake Powell is down 136 feet from capacity.

All the news about the lake’s level this week was bad: Deputy General Manager Kay Brothers told the water authority board that new projections show the lake level at 1,125 feet by Jan. 1, a level that would require the Federal Bureau of Reclamation to cut off access to the so-called “surplus” of unclaimed water from the Upper Basin states for Nevada, California and Arizona.

It would also set further restrictions on water use, which could include reducing the number of watering days and levying larger fines for water waste. Water rates could be raised, less productive uses of water could be banned, and a ban on

driveway car washing could be reinstated as well.

The states could collectively set an elevation to protect, slashing water deliveries to some users to keep the lake level in balance.

Las Vegas and its surrounding suburbs have done well with conservation efforts, last year trimming about 15 percent off of 2002’s water use rates. But Las Vegas’ effort does not significantly affect the lake level.

Nevada has an annual take of 300,000 acre-feet of water from Lake Mead. Arizona has an annual allocation of 2.8 million and California has 4.4 million acre-feet.

All users on the Colorado River, including Mexico, have a legal allocation of 15.5 million acre-feet. According to the Bureau of Reclamation, the inflow to the river this year is less than 8 million acre-feet. “The result is that we are going to have to do more to deepen an intake,” Mulroy said. “We are going to get to a critical level.”

Technical staffs from across the basin states have met over the last five weeks in an effort to find at least a temporary way to bridge the drought, which the agencies also hope will be temporary.

“Hopefully at the end of the discussions there will be some common agreement,” Mulroy said. “We have to protect the users on the river system.” However, that could mean urban users, who take, according to Mulroy, about 15 percent

of the river’s water, could be at odds with the agricultural users, who use 85 percent for the production of alfalfa, cotton and vegetables in California and Arizona.

If the lake’s elevation is to be protected, Mulroy and other urban water agencies expect the cuts in use to come from the agricultural users. Agricultural users are not eagerly embracing the concept.

Mulroy, in the morning in Las Vegas, said she hoped to have a “protected elevation” for the lake by the end of the day, a lake level that would require cutting off or limiting some water users to protect against the lake’s depletion.

She said that the conference of the basin states failed to set that protected elevation, but the agencies would come together July 22 and 23 in Salt Lake to take up the issue once again.

Mulroy said in the meantime, the water authority “has to plan for the worst.” Work to lower the intakes for Southern Nevada’s water system has to begin as soon as possible.

“It is an emergency,” she said.

