

*WATER AND THE WEST:  
The Colorado River Compact and the  
Politics of Water in the American West*

NORRIS HUNDLEY, JR.

Berkeley: University of California Press, 2nd. ed., 2009  
xv, 415 pp., bibl., index, maps, notes.

The most important stream in the American West, the Colorado River flows through or past parts of seven states (Arizona, California, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, Utah, and Wyoming), as well as a small portion of Mexico, before its depleted flows drain into the Gulf of California. The Colorado is not the largest river in the United States in terms of volume (it ranks sixth), but the Colorado provides life-giving water to much of the southwest quarter of the United States, sustaining a significant amount of the area's economy as well as generating hydroelectric power for the nation's energy grid. Thus, the Colorado River has

— and has had — an enormous impact on the United States that goes well beyond the river's regional geography.

Norris Hundley's *Water and the West* traces the history of that influence, particularly the struggles over the Colorado's water supplies — conflicts that continue to this day. This is the second edition of Hundley's book, the first having been published in 1975. Nonetheless, this book is still essential reading for water planners, lawyers, environmentalists, historians, and others concerned with water in the American West. Indeed, copies of the first edition of this book appear outside academic libraries on the shelves of countless attorneys and government officials throughout the entire American West.

And for good reason. Hundley's book surveys the history of the "Law of the River" — the legislation, regulations, court decisions, and administrative rulings that have shaped the uses of the Colorado River over the past century and a half — all of which clearly show that water allocation and control issues involving the Colorado were highly complex and involved multitudes of interested parties at all levels of government as well as in business and other aspects of society as a whole. Hundley begins with a review of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century attempts to control the highly irregular and erratic flows of this stream to supply nascent irrigation communities and speculative land development schemes in southern California, and he carefully documents how what initially was a localized water question evolved into a regional contest of enormous consequences over how the Colorado River would be tamed and simultaneously allocated among the seven basin states. It is this part of the story that occupies most of Hundley's narrative. Here, he demonstrates how the newly formed Reclamation Service and growing demands for water supplies up and down the Colorado River, as well as increasing needs for hydroelectric power, laid the foundation for the negotiation of the Colorado River Compact of 1922 — the first such use of the Constitution's authorization for states to form agreements among themselves to solve any interstate water conflict. Hundley carries the narrative through the long and difficult attempts to have that accord ratified by the seven Colorado River Basin states, the 1928 Boulder Canyon Act (which authorized the construction of Hoover Dam), and the

interstate litigation between Arizona and California over the following few decades leading to the U.S. Supreme Court's landmark 1963 decision in *Arizona v. California*, which, according to the Court, established that Congress had intended to apportion the stream when the federal legislators had passed the Boulder Canyon Act.

For the second edition of *Water and the West*, Hundley has brought the Colorado River history down to the present by offering a lengthy epilogue on various issues now affecting the stream. These include: how modern water measurement techniques (notably tree-ring analysis) have shown that the original assumptions about the Colorado's flows were probably overestimated; how global warming and greenhouse gases are affecting (and will continue to affect) water use and control; how more recent water-conservation attitudes will play a role in future Colorado River planning; how concerns over wildlife have become more influential on water allocation; and how recognizing Native American interests in water and the environment will play a major role in future Colorado River planning.

Most notably, however, Hundley's book remains fundamentally the bedrock foundation to understanding the background to Colorado River water issues as well as the multitude of forces shaping water use and control. This is due to Hundley's thorough grasp of documentary sources relating to his topic as well as to his careful footnoting and attention to detail in organization and writing. This is an exceptional book. It should continue to be at the top of anyone's list who truly wants to grasp the complexities of water and the American West.

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