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# States that share Colorado River water OK plan for drought

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PHOENIX (AP) -- The seven states that share Colorado River water have agreed on a plan to deal with drought issues and future water shortages.

However, a dispute over whether Arizona and Nevada can tap in-state tributaries remains unresolved.

Nevada has nearly exhausted its Colorado River apportionment and wants to draw water from the Virgin River, a tributary of the Colorado. States on the upper river object to the plan.

But to avoid a showdown on that issue, the states pledged to work on finding alternative sources of water that could replace the Virgin River supply.

Those alternatives would have to be in place by 2012, when Nevada says it will run out of existing resources.

If the dispute lands in court, it will drag Arizona with it, jeopardizing as much as half of the water that flows to Phoenix and Tucson through the Central Arizona Project canal.

The upper river states have also raised questions about Arizona's use of tributaries -- in-state rivers that, like the Virgin, flow into the Colorado.

"We've got to back away from the tributary issue," said Herb Guenther, director of the Arizona Department of Water Resources. "If we hang up on that, there's only one way to solve it and it's through litigation."

Representatives from the states signed the agreement Thursday in San Diego and sent it on Friday to Interior Secretary Gale Norton, who has told the states she will impose her own plan if talks among them fail.

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The plan is filled with promises to continue working on various issues and lays out ideas ranging from lining canals and creating new storage basins to cloud-seeding and weed removal.

It addresses key concerns of the upper river states (Colorado, New Mexico, Utah and Wyoming) and those on the lower river (Arizona, Nevada and California).

The Upper Basin states want assurances that they won't be forced to give up water from their reservoirs to meet the needs of the Lower Basin states if a shortage occurs. The Lower Basin states want to settle how treaties with Mexico would be handled in times of drought.

Guenther said the final agreement includes the three basic elements that have been discussed for months -- better management of the river's two largest storage reservoirs, Lakes Mead and Powell; improving efficiency among users, mostly farmers who order water almost daily; and augmenting the river's flow.

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