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HOPES HEAD UPSTREAM FOR WATER IN COLORADO RIVER BASIN

WASHINGTON, DC -- The Colorado River basin presents the greatest water management challenges of any river basin in the nation, with ever-expanding demands for multiple water uses, water demand exceeding supply, valued but fragile ecosystems, and support for nearly every type of water-relevant interest. The importance of instream flows – the amount of water flowing in a stream or river – is more pressing than ever, but in many parts of the basin, all water is spoken for.

A new report from the Alliance for Water Efficiency, American Rivers and Environmental Law Institute outlines practical possibilities for linking water efficiency efforts and healthier instream flows in the Colorado River basin. If a stretch of water is identified as needing improved instream flow, and a realistic opportunity for improving water efficiency exists, willing partners generally can build the bridges necessary to overcome other challenges.

Healthy instream flows are needed for riparian ecosystem function and the resulting services, from supporting fish populations, to improving water quality and stabilizing water supplies, to providing recreational opportunities. Water efficiencies have been accomplished throughout the Colorado River basin and across different economic sectors, but rarely has the resulting water directly benefitted instream flows. “A common misconception is that the law prevents this linkage,” said Adam Schempp of The Environmental Law Institute. “While it is true that the laws of different states and the roles of federal programs afford different opportunities, it is more a matter of how, not whether, this linkage can occur.”

“Our research around the West strongly suggests that when watersheds use a water efficiency program as a tool to help restore healthy streamflows, the result can be a win-win for water users, recreation, and the environment,” said project team member Michael Garrity of American Rivers.

The report announced today was funded by the Walton Family Foundation and draws from examples around the West of agricultural and municipal water efficiency efforts being used to improve instream flows. Through assessment of these examples, numerous interviews with water managers, and analysis of the laws and other unique characteristics of the seven states in which the Colorado River flows, the report identifies the challenges to and promising opportunities for linking water efficiency and instream flows in the basin.

“We see an opportunity here for communities to do double duty with water efficiency: meet their water needs and benefit the environment at the same time,” said Mary Ann Dickinson of the Alliance for Water Efficiency. “We wanted in this project to document what the barriers and issues might be in moving this concept forward.”

The report summary and the full report are online at www.a4we.org. The three partnering organizations will host a webinar on December 7th at 2:00 p.m. EST to describe the research and findings of this report and to answer questions.

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