Takeaways from water flowing in the normally dry Salt River

Regardless of where you are in the Valley, there is no doubt that you have had a rare sighting of water flowing through an ordinarily dry riverbed. Due to the above-average snowpack and for dam safety, the Salt River Project (SRP) began releasing water from Bartlett Dam on the Verde River in early March.

Seeing such a significant amount of water flow through our desert communities is noteworthy and brings short-term benefits. Yet, it also highlights the importance of expanding capacity at Bartlett Dam, where Verde River water is stored, to ensure that in the future, when we finally have a good winter of precipitation, all of that water can be put to beneficial use.

Climate research shows the Verde River watershed has entered into dryer dry periods and wetter wet periods, which means maintaining SRP's reservoir storage capacity is critical to managing variations in weather and river flows. To find a long-term solution, SRP is working on increasing the storage capacity for the Verde River reservoir system over the next decade. A group of 23 partners, including the AMWUA cities, other municipalities, and tribal and agricultural stakeholders, have committed to support the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation's feasibility study of options to modify Bartlett Dam. This would improve the management of water resources provided by the Verde River, and instead of spilling the water, it would be captured and stored, bringing long-term benefits.

Similar to changes made to Roosevelt Dam (storage for the Salt River) in the 1990s, modifying the dam to enlarge Bartlett Reservoir would increase the total water storage capacity on the Verde River. In fact, the increased water yield of between 60,000 to 115,000 acre-feet annually becomes an important resource as the AMWUA cities will see their Colorado River water supply reduced.

Another key motivation for modifying Bartlett Dam is that sediment from upstream has been building up behind Horseshoe Dam, the first major water-storage facility on the Verde River, reducing the amount of water that can be stored by an average of 1,000-acre feet annually. Over the years, this has meant increased reductions in the amount of water delivered to the AMWUA cities. Raising the height of Bartlett Dam addresses this diminished capacity at Horseshoe Reservoir and ensures this critical water source remains available for Valley cities.

So yes, this wet winter is positively impacting the Salt and Verde systems by raising the levels of Lake Roosevelt and its other reservoirs, which is good for Valley communities. It's also a good reminder that we need to continue wisely managing and investing in water supplies and key infrastructure projects like the Bartlett Dam Modification Project to ensure reliable water resources in the desert. These efforts also reduce our reliance on groundwater, which is a finite supply, and will help offset the impact of reduced Colorado River water.

Significant challenges may come as drought and shortage stresses some of our water supplies while Mother Nature boosts other supplies. Still, the water managers of AMWUA cities are keenly aware of the need to plan for extended dry periods, capture and store all the water we can, and manage each water source as efficiently as possible to better ensure our collective resiliency in the desert, even during years when those riverbeds remain dry.

Learn more about the Salt River Project HERE

For over 50 years, the Arizona Municipal Water Users Association has helped protect our member cities' ability to provide their communities with assured, safe, and sustainable water supplies. For more information, visit www.amwua.org.