

From the Grand Junction Daily Sentinel

## **Water banking a sensible way to help conserve Colorado River**

By [Guest Columnist](#)

Sunday, June 9, 2013

By Alison Gannett

When I heard that the Colorado River was named No. 1 on the 2013 list of America's Most Endangered Rivers by American Rivers, I was saddened but not surprised. Bottom line, we are taking more water out of the river than we have and the Colorado is operating at a dangerous water deficit.

It is not at all surprising that both major water storage locations on the river, Lake Powell and Lake Mead, are at less than 50 percent of capacity (and decreasing) and that the Colorado River has not completed its journey to the Sea of Cortez in decades.

As farmers in Colorado's North Fork Valley, my husband Jason and I know full well that the waters of the Colorado River — and its tributaries such as we depend on — are the lifeblood of agriculture for us, as well as many Western farmers in the seven basin states.

For our farm, the consequences of an endangered Colorado River can be severe: If the water outlook for next year does not improve, we may have to shut down the farm, which we also use to grow our own food, for a season.

This situation is clearly unsustainable. None of us who rely on the Colorado River for our livelihood can continue to operate under such conditions.

To shed light on what we are facing, the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation released its very comprehensive Colorado River Basin Water Supply and Demand Study in December 2012. This study looks 50 years ahead and projects substantial imbalances between supply and demand for the river system and wholly supports the American Rivers most endangered designation. It also takes a look at various scenarios that would ensure the region has the water it needs for our economy, environment and quality of life.

Among the most promising proposals to address water shortages are easy-to-implement and highly cost-effective strategies like agricultural and urban conservation and water sharing or "banking."

Water banking is a "no regrets" activity with minimal environmental impacts that uses markets to facilitate temporary or permanent transfer of water rights among water users, thereby moving water to where it is needed most. Water banks reduce the need for new expensive water

diversions from the river, and participation in the water sharing is voluntary and based on compensation.

To date, we have been operating under an antiquated water management system that requires us to “use it or lose it.” Last year was a very big drought year, and our water commissioner would have to come by and tell us we weren’t using enough water.

My way of thinking tells me that I should leave some in the basin for the next farmer or for the fish and the wildlife.

This kind of 21st century thinking is something I encourage our leaders to explore, and I was heartened to see water banking on the agenda at the May 13 “State of the Rivers” meeting that was sponsored by the Colorado River District and Colorado Mesa University Water Center.

At Holy Terror Farm, we raise all kinds of chemical-free vegetables, beans and herbs; grow fruits, nuts and berries; raise chickens, cows and pigs; and even have a thriving apiary. But as innovative as we can get, one thing we and other growers in the North Fork Valley cannot do without is good, clean water from the river. Without a flowing and healthy Colorado River, nothing grows and our farms perish.

To sit back and watch the Colorado River dry up and get polluted for lack of adequate care and protection is something I cannot do. I will do my part to be a good steward of the land and water, both on my farm and as an advocate for sensible, sustainable conservation policies throughout the Colorado River system.

I hope that policymakers also see the common sense in water conservation, that they do not let the Supply and Demand Study get dusty on a shelf and that they actively engage in forward-thinking conservation solutions to ensure that the river is here for us today and for future generations.

*Alison Gannett is owner of Holy Terror Farm in Paonia, and a member of the National Young Farmers’ Coalition, which “envisions a country where young people who are willing to work, get trained, and take a little risk can support themselves and their families in farming.”*