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Torrent in Colorado River Is Unleashed to Aid Fish

By [FELICITY BARRINGER](#)

A torrent of water was released into the Colorado River from the Glen Canyon Dam in Arizona on Tuesday, in a disputed effort to improve the environment for fish in the Grand Canyon.

The 60-hour release, being presided over by Interior Secretary [Dirk Kempthorne](#), was the latest chapter in a long-running tug of war between the department's Bureau of Reclamation, which controls the two major Colorado River dams, and the [National Park Service](#) over how to balance the Southwest's need for hydroelectric power against the needs of an endangered fish, the humpbacked chub, for water flows that mimic the natural rhythms of the river.

The water poured out of the dam as if pumped through a gigantic fire hose, at the rate of 41,500 cubic feet per second — enough to fill the [Empire State Building](#) in 20 minutes. This release, which engineers call "high flow," was meant to scour the river bottom and deposit silt and sediment to rebuild and extend sandbars and create new, calm backwater areas where the fish can spawn.

But the superintendent of Grand Canyon National Park, Steve Martin, argued that if such high flows were not repeated several times in the next five years, the overall water management plan was very likely to impair rather than improve the fish environment.

After this week's release, the rate of flow through 277 miles of the Grand Canyon is set to rise and fall for six months in a pattern that the [United States Geological](#)

[Survey](#) is calibrating to match the demand for hydroelectric power in cities like Las Vegas, said Randall Peterson, a regional manager with the Bureau of Reclamation.

In the fall, there will be two months of steady river flow, the kind that scientists say is best for endangered river fish. No other high-flow events like this week's are planned for the next five years, though they are not precluded, Mr. Peterson said. Nor are there plans to provide steady flows of water between April and October, as a scientific assessment made in 1994 seemed to require.

Without steady flows coming after the high flow, the newly enlarged sandbars would be quickly eroded, environmentalists say.

Mr. Peterson said a new scientific assessment of fish needs completed a few weeks ago did not call for an extended period of steady flows. The one time such flows were provided, he said, it cost \$30 million to \$35 million to replace the hydroelectric power that was sacrificed. Western states that use the power could sue if they do not get enough, he indicated.

This week's event was publicized by the [Interior Department](#), to the anger of environmental groups, which said the attention masked the rarity of this occurrence. Ideally, some sediment scientists argue, high flows should be annual events.

"This experiment, this celebration, is a charade," said Nikolai Lash, senior program director of the Grand Canyon Trust, a private environmental group. "It was a glamorous event staged for the media that shows the Bureau of Reclamation is doing something for the environment, when in fact there's a lot more to do."

Two earlier experiments on the impact of different kinds of river flows on the humpbacked chub have produced data that the bureau made little use of, according to the critique of Mr. Martin, the park superintendent.