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GLEN CANYON ENVIRONMENTAL
STUDIES OFFICE

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**DRAFT ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT RELEASED CONCERNING TEST
OF BEACH/HABITAT-BUILDING FLOWS IN GRAND CANYON**

The planned test of the Beach/Habitat-Building Flow this spring from Glen Canyon Dam through the Grand Canyon today moved a step closer to reality with the release of a draft Environmental Assessment (EA) and draft Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) document. The draft EA and draft FONSI were prepared in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) by the Bureau of Reclamation.

The test of the Beach/Habitat-Building Flow will consist of high releases from the dam for a short period of time which will rebuild high elevation sandbars, deposit nutrients, restore backwater channels, and provide some of the dynamics of a natural system. The releases will take place between March 22, 1996, and April 7, 1996.

The test of the releases is part of the preferred alternative of the recently filed Operation of Glen Canyon Dam Final Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). The upcoming event is to test the concept of such flows prior to the long-term implementation of the EIS, which is expected later this year. They represent a deviation from Interim Operating Criteria for Glen Canyon Dam, adopted in November 1991 while the EIS was being

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prepared. In accordance with provisions of the Grand Canyon Protection Act of 1992, the public and various interests specified in the Act have been consulted concerning this deviation.

According to the EA, there are several conditions that make the spring of 1996 an opportune time to conduct such a test. The riverine system has not experienced flows of the proposed magnitude for almost a decade. Limitations placed upon the operation of the dam since 1991 have caused the backwaters necessary to support endangered fish to fill in with sediment. Also, releases from Glen Canyon Dam in Water Year 1996 are expected to be greater than the minimum required; therefore the water required could be more easily scheduled. Finally, the scientific cadre necessary to monitor the test is essentially still in place following the years of research conducted under the Glen Canyon Environmental Studies which supported the development of the EIS.

The test of the Beach/Habitat-Building Flow is scheduled to begin March 22, 1996. For the first four days, there will be a constant 8,000 cubic-foot-per-second (cfs) flow from the dam. On March 26, 1996, the discharge will be increased at a maximum rate of 4,000 cubic-feet-per-second per-hour (cfs/hr) until a maximum flow of 45,000 cfs is reached. At that point, the dam will be releasing 13,500 cfs more than historic peak powerplant operations and 11,800 cfs more than the current maximum powerplant capacity. Previously, the powerplant capacity has been exceeded six times with flows of 45,000 cfs or greater, including the years 1965, 1980, 1983, 1984, 1985, and 1986. The 1980 flow was to test the spillways when Lake Powell initially filled, while the other years were to handle flooding on the Colorado River system.

The flows will be held at 45,000 cfs for seven days. On April 2, 1996, the discharge will be reduced over a gradual two-day period. From April 4, 1996, through the April 7, 1996, releases will again be held at a constant 8,000 cfs. On April 8, 1996, operations will return to the same pattern that has been in place since current Interim Operations of the dam began in November 1991. The constant 8,000 cfs flows before and after the high flows will allow researchers to conduct aerial photography and on-site evaluation of sedimentation patterns and

impacts.

The findings of the EA indicate that impacts to the canyon environment by the test are justified for research purposes, that they are short-lived, and are entirely consistent with the natural processes in both Glen and Grand Canyons. Those processes, of course, were disrupted with the construction of Glen Canyon Dam.

An anticipated impact to the downstream resources from the test of the Beach/Habitat-Building Flow will be two to four feet of deposition of sand on sandbars throughout the Grand Canyon. While some sandbars will experience net erosion, most will experience deposition, or gains. Such deposition will also be beneficial to cultural resources that are currently at risk due to erosion and sedimentation losses.

Backwater areas will be reformed and will become immediately available for use by native and non-native fish. Research data will be gathered on the relationships between flow duration and magnitude and the formation of backwaters. In addition, endangered humpback chubs and razorback suckers will likely benefit through the reforming of backwaters. There will be a temporary reduction in the aquatic food base and there will also be some loss of trout eggs, fry, and young fish.

Recreation activities will be affected during the test period. However, long-term benefits will be realized from the increase in sandbars and beaches.

Finally, little change will occur in the hourly hydropower operations during 1996, except during the test flow period. Over the course of the water year, from October 1, 1995, to September 30, 1996, two percent less energy will be generated as a result of the test.

Public comment on the draft EA and draft FONSI will be accepted through Friday, February 2, 1996. The document is available for review in the libraries of Bureau of Reclamation offices in Denver, Colorado; Flagstaff, Arizona; Phoenix, Arizona; and Salt Lake City, Utah. Copies may also be requested by writing Gordon Lind, NEPA Manager, Upper Colorado Region,

Bureau of Reclamation, 125 South State Street, Room 6107, Salt Lake City, UT 84138-1102. Mr. Lind may also be reached by telephone at (801) 524-3216. Comments should be returned to Mr. Lind at the Bureau of Reclamation by mail.

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