

SPECIAL SCREENING

A River Ran Through It

Redford Documentary Explores Water Issues in the New West

COURTESY WATERSHED

The mighty Colorado River runs through seven states in the Western United States, rushing toward its delta in Mexico's Gulf of California.

Because much of the river is siphoned off, mainly by agriculture, it runs dry before it reaches its natural end. Unless action is taken, the river will continue to retreat, creating a potential disaster for 30 million people who depend upon it.

This potential environmental catastrophe is the subject of the new documentary "Watershed: Exploring a New Water Ethic for the New West," executive produced and narrated by Robert Redford, which will be screened at the annual conference of the Society of Environmental Journalists on Wednesday, Oct. 17 at 9 p.m.

NewsPro's Hillary Atkin talked with Redford and his son, producer Jamie Redford, to discover their connection to the river,

its problems, and most importantly, the solutions.

NewsPro: You've long been associated with the American West. What inspired your passion and involvement for this project?

Robert Redford: I grew up in Los Angeles, in a lower middle class family, but was able to get to the Sierras. I worked at Yosemite and between that experience and being near the ocean, I took water for granted — something you played in, rafted in, and drank. When I bought land in Sundance, I had to become more aware. There was one stream coming off the mountain we were dependent on. Shepherders would tell me where water was, even if you couldn't see it, because they had to get from water source to water source. I got fascinated. During a conference at Sundance in 2009, there was a consensus that people are not aware water is such an essential to our well-being, that it was in danger. We started to focus on the Colorado River. When I found out it no longer reaches its



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destination, it was emblematic of conditions all around the world with rivers drying up everywhere. My business is film, so we decided to make a documentary that Jamie produced.

NewsPro: Jamie, what was the impetus for you?

Jamie Redford: I'm a great believer in documentary film as a way to move the bar forward in making positive change. "Watershed" is our stab at reversing so much generalized ignorance of where our water comes from in the West. If you look at overall trends of increasing use by industry and population growth, we're on a collision course with calamity if we don't change things. We felt like water needed to be addressed. At our 2009 conference, politicians, migrant workers, Navajos, the recreational industry — everyone agreed people have to understand their water because ignorance is damaging. This film is meant to be an awareness-raiser. We wanted it not just to be alarmist. We wanted to offer hope and ways people can make a difference. We're going to have to inspire people to make changes.



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NewsPro: Who is your target audience for "Watershed"?

JR: It's the 30 million people who rely on the Colorado River, each of whom uses an average of 100 gallons a day. Whether it's quantity or quality, everyone is facing a change in the way they need to deal with water. It's the same thing for many rivers of the Northeast in terms of quality, as they are so overburdened by toxins they might as well be arid.

NewsPro: What did you learn through making the film?

RR: I had a general knowledge of the Colorado River, but I didn't know details of the use of the river. I figured that the problem was not enough supply. Some of it's to be assumed, with expanded populations and energy generation. What I didn't know beyond that went deeper: 70% is taken up by agriculture, according to the Colorado Compact of 1922, which was drawn up during a wet period. It promised more than it could deliver. It became clear you could see the picture of why this was going on. But there are solutions.

NewsPro: In certain parts of the country, water pollution is a well-publicized issue. How can water conservation issues come to the fore?

JR: A lot of it has to do with a fundamental shift that we need to value water, that financially we don't place the right value on

it, particularly in arid regions. People respond well to economic pressures. We have a real estate mentality that water needs to be available cheaply. You have people in Minnesota paying more for water than people having it pumped through mountains. There still needs to be a shift nationally.

RR: I don't think many people know what it costs in water to extract a gallon of oil. Or what goes into fracking. To get down and crack the earth with chemicals getting into the aquifer that can poison people. With sources of energy, no one tells you the cost involving water. I think the Colorado River can be used for people to look at situations in their own states.

NewsPro: With everything else going on environmentally right now — drought, extreme weather, the melting of ice caps — how do you ask people to make a difference?

JR: If this film could change the behavior around water, that would be a tall goal. If you have a new awareness and behavior that will have an impact, you can start with your own personal practices. Then when you find out your city is watering parks at noon that's going to make you angry.

RR: Whole Foods wanted to tie themselves to this project, and has screened it in 77 cities. Beyond that, you hope people want to become active. They can donate some money to the cause. It'll only take \$17 million. Another thing people don't know is how much money comes from recreation and that 250,000 are employed by that. Put all that together, they might contribute. If enough people do, the aggregation of small amounts will get the job done. Right now there is still a chance. □

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