Credit: Courtesy Bruce Babbitt

Bruce Babbitt has been a leader on western land and water policy for nearly half a century. He served as Arizona attorney general from 1975 to 1978, Arizona governor from 1978 to 1987, and U.S. Secretary of the Interior from 1993 to 2001. Secretary Babbitt, the namesake of the Babbitt Center for Land and Water Policy, also served on the board of directors for the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy from 2009 to 2017. Among his numerous accomplishments was the adoption of Arizona's Groundwater Management Act during his tenure as governor. For the past two years, he served as an advisor to California Governor Jerry Brown on state water issues. He spoke with Dr. Jim Holway, director of the Babbitt Center, for this special issue of *Land Lines*. Video excerpts of their conversation are available online at the Lincoln Institute website.

Colorado River Reflections

JIM HOLWAY: **Bruce, from your perspective, what is the importance of the Colorado River?**

BRUCE BABBITT: Well, John Wesley Powell answered that question nearly 150 years ago. We live in a land of sparse rainfall, and not enough water flowing down to our rivers. Demand will always be running ahead of supply. And how we come to grips with that as a political culture is kind of the big reality of the Colorado River. Historically, water use was largely agricultural, but urban demand is constantly increasing due to population growth. Western growth and progress is going to require a lot of imagination and innovation in our use of this river.

JH: **What is the role of the river in the economy and quality of life in the Southwest?**

BB: Without the Colorado River, this would be a mighty empty land. That's the reality. We have populated and settled this land on a "build it, and the water will come" basis. And you know, it's a spectacular part of our history. It is kind of embedded in our view of the West as a land of infinite opportunity. But we are now discovering the limits. Agricultural and urban needs are coming into conflict. We also need to factor in environmental and ecological values that have been long neglected—and that add so much to the quality of life and the appeal of the American West.

JH: **What is the state of the river today, and how has it changed since your tenure as Secretary of the Interior?**

BB: When I went to Washington in 1993 to become Secretary of the Interior, Lake Powell and Lake Mead were full to overflowing, and the Colorado River didn't seem to be of much immediate concern. Our perception was driven by the fact that this was a system overflowing with possibility. Today, scarcely 25 year later, Lake Mead is approaching dead pool, at which point it can no longer release water or generate power. This transition, which we did not anticipate or plan for, is a stark reminder of the need for long-range scenario planning for use of land and water.

JH: **What do you view as the major Colorado River challenges we need to address?**

BB: The first challenge is to recognize that we live in a desert with huge and rapid climatic fluctuations. Across the twentieth century, we built the great system of reservoirs to store water against these fluctuations. But our assumptions regarding climate change and population growth were way off. We are now drawing more than a million acre-feet out of reservoir storage each year in excess of average inflow. And obviously that cannot continue. We must now work toward establishing balance across the entire basin. To get to that equilibrium will require adjustments from every water user: agricultural, municipal, power generation, and environmental uses. And it obviously can't be done on a piecemeal, ad hoc basis; we'll have to invent new processes of public involvement and shared adjustments from every town and city and farm in the basin.

JH: **What policy and management structures do we need to move toward a more balanced approach?**

BB: In the West, connecting and integrating land and water use is a relatively new idea. Water use, like land use and zoning, has traditionally been a local affair, with little coordination or direction at the state or interstate level. But water is a common resource; developing on a local, project by project basis without thinking about regional supply and demand constraints inevitably leads to the crises and environmental degradation that we are now experiencing. The question is how to change that.

JH: **What do you see as the most difficult policy or political challenges?**

BB: Moving toward more proactive planning will be a social and political challenge. It can't be accomplished by issuing regulations from on high in Washington or Phoenix or Denver. We need to begin at the personal level and move up from the ground. Begin with a renewed personal conservation ethic, engage communities in efficiency and reuse programs, integrate water into local land use and zoning, and propagate local success stories into state policies and then into basin-wide policy.

JH: **Are the states the key to this bigger, system-wide view, or is it a federal role?**

BB: You know, one of the remarkable things about the Colorado River is that it's the only river basin in the United States that is managed and operated under the direction of the federal government. In 1963, after nearly a century of warfare among the basin states, the Supreme Court stepped in, dictated a formula for sharing the water, and then appointed the Secretary of the Interior to manage the river and its reservoirs. At the time, many westerners felt that such a takeover would be a disaster. In fact, it has worked very well, mainly because successive secretaries have used their power judiciously, encouraging the states to cooperate among themselves, and stepping in only as a last resort when the states could not agree. That has provided both impetus and threat, setting the table for the states to come together.

JH: **When you were Secretary of the Interior, you utilized this "speak softly, but carry a big stick" approach. Are you optimistic about the role the states are playing or do you feel they need more encouragement to step up?**

BB: Although this federal-state management system has worked well to date, it needs improvement. An example is the current negotiation among the Interior Department and the states over the shortages occurring in Lake Mead. Those discussions have moved in fits and starts, with shortage projections constantly under revision. Remarkably, there is not even a standing interstate organization in existence to guide data gathering, research, and planning efforts. We're going to have to find some way to be more proactive, not to wait until the eleventh hour. We're going to have to move it up to the sixth or seventh hour and anticipate the possible scenarios we're looking at in the next decade, the next two or three decades.

JH: **Along the lines of rethinking old patterns, what are the most effective ways to bring local land and water planning and management together?**

BB: We need to devise new means of planning within each of the basin states. We can learn a lot from traditional land use planning and zoning, which can now be connected with and integrated into planning for water use. Call it land-water use planning. We can begin with local examples of conservation and water use efficiency, which should then extend to broader planning efforts such as the "assured water supply" legislation in Arizona—a very basic but innovative law that simply said, before you put a spade in the ground, you've got to show us what's going to run through the faucets for the next 100 years . . . Climbing up the staircase of water management and across the staircases of municipal, county, state, multi-state, and federal government, it is important to go out and look at good examples like that.

Governor Babbitt signs the Arizona Groundwater Management Act in 1980.
Credit: Courtesy Arizona Municipal Water Users Association

JH: **As governor of Arizona, you led efforts to adopt the 1980 Groundwater Management Act. Do you feel the conversation about rural water issues has changed since then?**

BB: It has not changed. Arizona is an instructive example of the need to set up planning processes and then keep up the effort, year after year, to improve and expand their application. The Groundwater Management Act of 1980 revolutionized water management in the urban counties that include Phoenix and Tucson. However, in the 35 odd years since then, the Act has not been extended to the rural areas of the state, which are now encountering the same issues of rapid development and demand. Political leadership matters, and it has been in short supply in Arizona and across the West.

JH: **You have served as both the governor of Arizona and the U.S. Secretary of the Interior. With the advantage of hindsight, are there key things you would have done differently?**

BB: Well, look, where you stand often depends on where you sit. It would not be unfair to look across my time in public office and say, didn't he used to be kind of a state's rights guy, giving all those speeches about that evil bureaucracy in Washington, and then you pick up my speeches 20 years later, and I tended to frame it the other way. The fact is, it's not one or the other; we must work together at all levels of government, from the very local up to the state capitols and on to Washington.

Looking back, I know I sometimes underestimated the importance of advocacy and direct voter engagement. In the past, there were times when I was impatient, when I wished I could take action instead of taking time to listen at town halls. I think if I could go back, I would spend more time on federal-state partnerships—and I'd also spend a lot more time thinking about those town halls.

JH: **Where does the leadership need to come from to address the challenges you've identified?**

BB: Americans have always been skeptical of government, and that's really what the Constitution is about—appropriate limits on government. In the sweep of American history, we have tended to be pragmatic, optimistic, and open-minded about what needs to be done. We are perfectly capable of saying we don't want the federal government, then in the same breath demanding federal help.

At present we are witness to a near collapse of the traditional federal-state partnership as the federal government declines into an idiosyncratic and unpredictable presence in the West. It's really unfortunate. We've been through these periods in American history before. And we'll get through this one.

This collapse at the national level is being counterbalanced by a renewal of interest and participation in local government. American history is instructing us once again that when the national government goes stale, there often comes a grassroots renewal across the land. And that is a great opportunity for all of us to reinvigorate planning from the grassroots upward.

JH: **What led you to give your name to the Babbitt Center for Land and Water Policy?**

BB: I was educated as a geologist and tend to approach problems in linear, formulaic terms. During my time as a Lincoln Institute board member, I came to a much deeper understanding of the interconnectedness of land and water use with economics, and the social and political aspects of land use. Lincoln has a long and impressive history of bringing together deep, data-driven research, multiple academic disciplines, and real-world practitioners to bring new insights to how we live and prosper on the land. If my presence and experience can add even a small amount to the Lincoln mission, I am eager to continue learning and contributing.

JH: **Given your extensive international experience, what lessons from elsewhere do you think the Babbitt Center and others could bring back to the Colorado River Basin?**

BB: Early on, David Lincoln and his family decided to extend the work of the Lincoln Institute to two places that have always been of special interest to me: China and Latin America. Both regions face complex water issues, heightened by the onset of global warming, from which we can learn and to which we can contribute from our own experience. Climate change is accelerating most at the poles and in the tropics and the near-tropics. So we kind of have an advanced projection, in a different context, of the kinds of things that we're going to need to be dealing with in the Colorado River Basin.

JH: **What are you doing now? What's next for you?**

BB: Well, at some point I'll probably head back to Brazil and the Amazon Basin, where I have long been involved in conservation causes. But out here in the West, those of us who are obsessed with water are known as "water buffaloes." And water buffaloes never stray far from the water hole, so you are likely to see me around the West, still learning and thinking about our future on this land.

Jim Holway is director of the Babbitt Center for Land and Water Policy.