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Interior chief pans Hetch Hetchy plan

By Mike Taugher

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SAN FRANCISCO - The nation's top natural resources official cast a cup of cold, mountain water Wednesday on an ambitious proposal to tear out a century-old dam and restore Hetch Hetchy Valley in Yosemite National Park.

"We have not closed any doors on anything, but what I see is a scarcity of water throughout the West," said Interior Secretary Gale Norton.

Norton made the remarks during a brief question-and-answer session with reporters after speaking here to the Commonwealth Club of California.

Hetch Hetchy, which was compared favorably to Yosemite Valley by John Muir before it was flooded, serves as a water supply reservoir for the city of San Francisco and the Peninsula.

Norton said she sees a need for more water storage to counter western droughts. "The issue of Hetch Hetchy seems to be going the other way in terms of doing away with a large supply of water."

Prompted by recent studies, including one by Environmental Defense, the California Resources Agency is reviewing the feasibility of tearing out the dam, restoring the valley and finding other water storage options for about 2 million people.

Environmentalists say other storage sites are available, including Don Pedro Reservoir downstream on the Tuolumne River.

San Francisco officials have historically been extremely reluctant to even consider tearing out the dam, which is considered by city officials to be an engineering marvel and a source of crisp clean water coming straight out of a granite bowl.

"It is a huge undertaking to remove a dam, as well as find alternative water supplies," Norton said.

Norton, the first woman to head the Interior Department, oversees the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs and the top federal agencies in charge of water development and delivery and enforcement of the Endangered Species Act.

In her speech to the club, Norton defended the Bush Administration's environmental policies, saying they are designed to face subtler, more complex issues than the obvious environmental crises of the 1960s and 1970s.

She expressed support for oil drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, said the administration supports a moratorium on offshore drilling in California and asserted that the nation needs to produce more domestic energy and build nuclear power plants.

Asked why the administration has declined to take aggressive steps on global climate change, Norton



said, "There certainly seems to be warming that is occurring. There is less consensus about what is causing climate change and whether it is something that is a fluctuation or truly is a long-term phenomenon."

Norton's major water initiative, called Water 2025, was one of the few federal natural resource initiatives in recent years to be well-received by environmentalists. The House of Representatives this week declined to provide any of the \$30 million requested by the Bush Administration.

Norton suggested the lack of funding was not important, saying that a bill that would clear the way for money would "not be very extensive or very controversial."
