WASHINGTON, D.C. -- U.S. Sen. Bill Armstrong (R-Colo.) today told a Senate Energy Subcommittee that salinity damage on the Colorado River caused "$100 million worth of damage last year -- four times the cost of the flood damage" from the river this spring and summer.

"This staggering damage toll is expected to more than double (in constant dollars) by the year 2000 unless tough salt pollution control measures are taken now," Armstrong, chief sponsor of the legislation, said. "The Colorado River provides irrigation for agriculture, hydro-electric power, a diverse array of recreational activities and water for 17 million people from Denver to San Diego. It also carries an unbelievable 10 million tons of dissolved salt annually as it weaves its way downstream."

The Colorado Senator told the members of the Senate Water and Power Subcommittee of the Energy and Natural Resources Committee that action is needed on his bill, S. 752, to prevent "continued poisoning of the river by salt."

Not only does the high salinity level cause agricultural damage, but the growing problem continues to bring serious environmental losses. "Some of this country's most significant fish and wildlife habitats have been damaged," Armstrong said, "and the threat to public health is increasingly serious."
"This is obviously a serious Western problem, but it is a national issue," Armstrong said. "Salinity is the Southwestern equivalent of the Northeast's acid rain. Both pose dangerous water quality threats to a large portion of the country and both need to be placed high on the national problem-solving agenda."

The four main objectives of the Armstrong bill are:

* To authorize six new salinity control units, to be constructed within the funding limits of the 1974 Salinity Control Act. Four of these are ordinary off-farm control measures designed to reduce the contact between saline soils and the waters of the Colorado. Another unit involves, for the first time, Bureau of Land Management land. The last of the six new off-farm units gives the Department of the Interior flexible authority to demonstrate new technologies for disposing beneficially of this waste saline water.

* To establish a voluntary on-farm control program which will be administered by the Department of Agriculture to reduce soil erosion and improve water management and conservation efforts.

* To provide cost-sharing arrangements between the Federal government and water users.

* To replace wildlife and other environmental values that may be impaired due to construction of the salinity units.

"Congress took action in 1974 when it passed the Salinity Control Act," Armstrong said. "The increasing seriousness of salinity levels demands further action to stop the salt poisoning of the Colorado River."