Management of the Colorado River: Water Allocations, Drought, and the Federal Role

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The Colorado River Basin covers more than 246,000 square miles in seven U.S. states (Wyoming, Colorado, Utah, New Mexico, Arizona, Nevada, and California) and Mexico. Pursuant to federal law, the Bureau of Reclamation (part of the Department of the Interior) manages much of the basin’s water supplies. Colorado River water is used primarily for agricultural irrigation and municipal and industrial (M&I) uses; it is also important for hydropower production, fish and wildlife, and recreational uses.

River Management

A collection of compacts, treaties, statutes, and other authorities govern Colorado River allocations and apportionments. The foundational management document, the Colorado River Compact of 1922, established a framework to apportion water supplies between the river’s Upper and Lower Basins, divided at Lee Ferry, AZ. The compact allocated 7.5 million acre-feet (MAF) annually to each basin, and a 1994 treaty made an additional 1.5 MAF in annual flows available to Mexico. A Supreme Court case and related decrees inform the Secretary of the Interior’s management of the delivery of all water below Hoover Dam.

Apportioned Colorado River water exceeds the river’s natural flows, and actual consumptive use plus other water losses (e.g., evaporation) typically exceeds flows. This imbalance, coupled with a long-term drought dating to 2000, has stressed basin water supplies. Reclamation closely tracks the status of two large reservoirs—Lake Powell in the Upper Basin and Lake Mead in the Lower Basin—as indicators of basin storage conditions. Since the onset of drought in the early 2000s, storage levels at these reservoirs have fallen. To alleviate these trends, water releases from both lakes have been tied to specific water storage levels. Since 2020, pursuant to previous agreements, Reclamation has reduced water deliveries in Arizona and Nevada and reduced its deliveries to Mexico. In the Upper Basin, Lake Powell’s storage also has continued to drop; some worry this could jeopardize hydropower generation at Glen Canyon Dam. Wet conditions in 2023 improved the short-term outlook for both reservoirs.

Efforts to Address Drought

The federal government has led multiple efforts to improve the basin’s water supply outlook, resulting in collaborative agreements in 2003 and 2007 and in the 2019 drought contingency plans (DCPs) for the Upper and Lower Colorado River Basins. In 2022, due to widespread concern about the basin’s long-term water supplies, Reclamation initiated a process to revise its near-term operational guidelines for river management. In May 2023, the Department of the Interior and basin states announced a consensus-based proposal in which the three Lower Basin states will conserve a total of 3 MAF prior to 2026, with 2.3 MAF of these reductions compensated by the federal government using previously appropriated funds. Reclamation formally adopted this proposal in March 2024.

Most of the agreements to conserve Colorado River Basin water supplies expire in 2026, and Reclamation is currently leading a process analyzing options for “long-term” (post-2026) operations. To date, Upper and Lower Basin leaders have been unable to agree on a preferred set of actions to guide long-term basin operations, and have submitted competing plans to the federal government. Reclamation plans to publish its preferred alternative for long-term operations by late 2024.

Congressional Role

Congress funds and oversees management of basin water and power facilities. Congress has enacted legislation affecting Colorado River waters (e.g., Indian water rights settlements, new water storage facilities) and authorizing water shortage mitigation (e.g., the DCPs and other related efforts). Section 50233 of P.L. 117-169 (popularly known as the Inflation Reduction Act) provided $4.0 billion for drought mitigation in the West. The majority of this funding is being used to compensate water contractors for recently agreed-upon delivery reductions. Congress may consider further amending existing authorities or funding mitigation activities for basin water shortages.
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Introduction

From its headwaters in Colorado and Wyoming to its terminus in the Gulf of California, the Colorado River Basin covers more than 246,000 square miles. The basin spans seven U.S. states (Wyoming, Colorado, Utah, New Mexico, Arizona, Nevada, and California) and two countries (the United States and Mexico). Pursuant to federal law, the Bureau of Reclamation (Reclamation), a component of the Department of the Interior (DOI), plays a prominent role in the management of the basin’s waters. In the Lower Basin (i.e., Arizona, Nevada, and California), Reclamation also serves as water master on behalf of the Secretary of the Interior, a role that elevates the status of the federal government in basin water management.¹ The federal role in managing Colorado River water is magnified by the multiple federally owned and operated water storage and conveyance facilities in the basin, which provide low-cost water and hydropower supplies.

Colorado River water is used primarily for agricultural irrigation and municipal and industrial (M&I) purposes. The river’s flow and stored water also are important for power production, fish and wildlife, and recreation, among other uses. A majority of basin water supplies (70%) are used to irrigate 5.5 million acres of land; basin waters also provide M&I water supplies to nearly 40 million people.² Much of the area that depends on the river for its water supplies is outside of the drainage area of the Colorado River Basin. Storage and conveyance facilities on the Colorado River provide trans-basin diversions that serve areas such as Cheyenne, WY; multiple cities in Colorado’s Front Range (e.g., Fort Collins, Denver, Boulder, and Colorado Springs, CO); Provo, UT; Albuquerque and Santa Fe, NM; and Los Angeles, San Diego, and the Imperial Valley in Southern California (Figure 1). Colorado River hydropower facilities can provide up to 4,200 megawatts of electrical power per year.³ The river also provides habitat for a wide range of species, including several species listed under the federal Endangered Species Act (ESA; 87 Stat. 884, 16 U.S.C. §§1531-1544). It flows through seven national wildlife refuges and 11 National Park Service (NPS) units; these and other areas of the river support important recreational opportunities.⁴

¹ As discussed later in “The Law of the River: Foundational Documents and Programs,” the Boulder Canyon Project Act of 1928 made the Secretary of the Interior responsible for the distribution (via contract) of all Colorado River water delivered below Hoover Dam (i.e., the Lower Basin), and authorized such regulations as necessary to enter into these contracts. Subsequent court decisions confirmed the Secretary’s power to apportion surpluses and shortages among and within Lower Basin states; this forms the basis for the designation Lower Basin water master. No similar authorities or designations have been provided for the Upper Basin.
³ Ibid., p. 3.
⁴ Ibid.
Precipitation and runoff in the basin are highly variable. Water conditions on the river depend largely on snowmelt in the basin’s northern areas. From 1906 to 2023, natural flows in the Colorado River Basin averaged about 14.6 million acre-feet (MAF) annually.\(^5\) Flows have dipped significantly since 2000;
annual natural flows from 2000 to 2023 averaged approximately 12.5 MAF per year. According to Reclamation, the 23-year period from 2000 to 2022 was the driest 23-year period in more than 100 years of Colorado River record keeping, and among the driest periods in the past 1,200 years. Climate change impacts, including warmer temperatures and altered precipitation patterns, may further increase the likelihood of prolonged drought in the basin.

Congress plays a prominent role in the management of the Colorado River. Congress funds and oversees Reclamation’s management of Colorado River Basin facilities, including facility operations and programs to protect and restore endangered and threatened species. Congress has also approved and continues to consider Indian water rights settlements involving Colorado River waters, and development of new and expanded water storage in the basin. In addition, Congress has approved supplemental funding to mitigate drought and stretch basin water supplies, and new authorities for Reclamation to combat drought and enter into agreements with states and those who are contracted to receive water from federal Colorado River infrastructure (i.e., contractors). This report provides background on management of the Colorado River, with a focus on recent developments. It also discusses the congressional role in the management of basin waters.

The Law of the River:
Foundational Documents and Programs

The Law of the River refers to a collection of compacts, treaties, statutes, and other authorities that govern Colorado River allocations and apportionments. In the latter part of the 19th century, interested parties in the Colorado River Basin began to recognize that local interests alone could not solve the challenges associated with development of the Colorado River. Plans conceived by parties in California’s Imperial Valley to divert water from the mainstream of the Colorado River were thwarted because these proposals were subject to the sovereignty of both the United States and Mexico. The river also presented engineering challenges, such as deep canyons and erratic water flows, and economic hurdles that prevented local or state groups from building the necessary storage facilities and canals to provide an adequate water supply. In part because local or state groups could not resolve these “national problems,” Congress considered options to control the Colorado River and resolve potential conflicts between the states. In an effort to resolve these conflicts and avoid litigation, Congress gave its consent for the states and Reclamation to enter into an agreement to apportion Colorado River water supplies in 1921.

6 CRS Analysis of Reclamation Flow Data.
9 For an example of how courts characterize the Law of the River, see, for example, Navajo Nation v. Dep’t of the Interior, 26 F.4th 794, 800 (9th Cir. 2022).
11 S. Doc. No. 67-142 (1922). For example, the states in the Upper Basin (Colorado, Wyoming, Utah, and New Mexico), where the majority of the river’s runoff originates, feared that a storage facility making water available downstream might form a basis for claims to priority access to basin waters by Lower Basin states before Upper Basin states could develop means to access their share.
12 Ch. 72, 42 Stat. 171 (1921). In lieu of litigation, interstate compacts have historically been a preferred means of allocating (continued...)
The below sections discuss the resulting agreement, the Colorado River Compact, as well as key statutory authorities, the Supreme Court’s decision in Arizona v. California, and other documents and agreements that form the basis of the Law of the River.

**Colorado River Compact**

The Colorado River Compact of 1922, negotiated by the seven basin states and the federal government, was initially signed by all but one basin state (Arizona). Under the compact, the states established a framework to apportion the water supplies between the Upper Basin and the Lower Basin, with the dividing line between the two basins located at Lee Ferry, AZ, below the confluence of the Colorado and Paria Rivers near the Utah border. Each basin was apportioned 7.5 MAF annually for beneficial consumptive use, and the Lower Basin was given the right to increase its beneficial consumptive use by an additional 1 MAF annually. The agreement also required that Upper Basin states not deplete more than a total of 75 MAF over any 10-year period (i.e., 7.5 MAF per year), thus allowing for averaging over time to make up for low-flow years. The compact did not address inter- or intrastate allocations of water (which left it to future agreements and legislation), nor did it address tribal rights or other rights that existed at the time the compact was finalized. The compact also contemplated how the basins could share the burden of provisioning water to Mexico, the river’s natural terminus, the details of which were addressed in subsequent international agreements. The compact was not to become binding until it had been approved by the legislatures of each of the signatory states and by Congress.

**Boulder Canyon Project Act**

Congress approved and modified the Colorado River Compact in the Boulder Canyon Project Act (BCPA) of 1928. The BCPA ratified the 1922 compact, and authorized the construction of a federal facility to impound water in the Lower Basin (Boulder Dam, later renamed Hoover Dam) and of related facilities to deliver water in Southern California (e.g., the All-American Canal, which delivers Colorado River water to California’s Imperial Valley). The BCPA apportioned the Lower Basin’s 7.5 MAF per year among the three Lower Basin states: 4.4 MAF per year to California, 2.8 MAF to Arizona, and 300,000 acre-feet (AF) to Nevada, with the states to divide any surplus waters among them. It also directed the Secretary of the Interior to serve as the sole contracting authority for Colorado River water use in the Lower Basin and authorized several storage projects for study in the Upper Basin.

Congress’s approval of the compact in the BCPA was conditioned on a number of factors, including ratification of the compact by California and five other states (thereby allowing the compact to become effective without Arizona’s concurrence), and California agreeing by act of its legislature to limit its water

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13 Because the Colorado River Compact of 1922 did not specify the apportionments for individual states, Arizona initially refused to sign and ratify the agreement out of concern that rapidly growing California would lay claim to most of the Lower Basin’s share of water. Arizona signed and ratified the compact in 1944.

14 Lee Ferry is the dividing line between basins designated in the compact. Lees Ferry (or Lee’s Ferry), approximately 1 mile upstream from that point, is the location of the USGS streamgage that has measured flows dating to 1921. After the compact was signed, the Lees Ferry streamgage, along with a gage on the Paria River, became the measurements used to determine compliance with the compact.

15 Arizona receives water under both the Upper and the Lower Basin apportionments, because parts of the state are in both basins.


17 Arizona v. California.

use to 4.4 MAF per year and not more than half of any surplus waters. California met this requirement by passing the California Limitation Act of March 4, 1929, and the compact became effective on that date.\(^\text{19}\)

**1944 U.S.-Mexico Water Treaty**\(^\text{20}\)

In 1944, the United States signed a water treaty with Mexico (1944 U.S.-Mexico Water Treaty) to guide how the two countries share the waters of the Colorado River.\(^\text{21}\) The treaty established water allocations for the two countries and created a governance framework (i.e., the International Boundary and Water Commission) to resolve disputes arising from the treaty’s execution. The treaty requires the United States to provide Mexico with 1.5 MAF of Colorado River water annually, plus an additional 200,000 AF when a surplus is declared. During drought, the United States may reduce deliveries to Mexico in similar proportion to reductions of U.S. consumptive uses. The treaty has been supplemented by additional agreements between the United States and Mexico, known as *minutes*, regarding matters related to the treaty’s execution and interpretation.\(^\text{22}\)

**Arizona v. California**

Arizona ratified the Colorado River Compact in 1944, at which time the state began to pursue a federal project (later named the Central Arizona Project, or CAP) to bring Colorado River water to its primary population centers in Phoenix and Tucson. California opposed the project, claiming it had senior water rights based on its “first in time” use under the doctrine of prior appropriation and that any diversions from Colorado River *tributaries* should be included in Arizona’s allotted 2.8 MAF under the Colorado River Compact.\(^\text{23}\) In 1952, Arizona filed suit against California in the U.S. Supreme Court to settle these and other issues.\(^\text{24}\)

Eleven years later, in the 1963 *Arizona v. California* decision, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of Arizona.\(^\text{25}\) The ruling was notable in forgoing typical Reclamation deference to state law under the Reclamation Act of 1902 and formed the basis for the Secretary of the Interior’s role as *water master* for

\(^\text{19}\) The Department of the Interior also requested that California prioritize its Colorado River rights among users before the Colorado River Compact became effective; the state established priority among these users for water in both “normal” and “surplus” years in the California Seven-Party Agreement, signed in August 1931.


\(^\text{22}\) International Boundary and Water Commission (IBWC), Minutes between the United States and Mexican Sections of the IBWC, at https://www.ibwc.gov/Treaties_Minutes/Minutes.html. For more information on recent minutes, see section, “Minute 319 and Minute 323 Agreements with Mexico.”

\(^\text{23}\) Historically, water in the western United States (versus riparian rights in the eastern portion) has been governed by some form of the *rule of prior appropriation*. Under this rule, the party that first appropriates water and puts it to *beneficial use* thereby acquires a vested right to continue to divert and use that quantity of water against claimants junior in time.

\(^\text{24}\) Article III of the Constitution states that in all cases in which a state shall be a party, the Supreme Court has original jurisdiction. U.S. Constitution, Article III, §2, cl. 2. In original jurisdiction cases, the Supreme Court issues detailed decrees that are more akin to trial court judgments than the Supreme Court’s usual appellate decisions.

the Lower Basin. The Court determined that the BCPA serves as the framework for apportioning the Lower Basin’s share of the mainstream waters of the Colorado River, neither the BCPA nor water contracts require any specific formula for apportioning shortages, and the Secretary of the Interior exercises considerable control in managing the delivery of water from Lake Mead to the Lower Basin. The Court determined that the Colorado River Compact guides resolution of disputes regarding allocations between basins, that statutory authority—in this case the BCPA—guides Lower Basin water allocations originating from the main stream of the River, and that tributary allocations are reserved to the states. Although California argued its historical use of the river trumped Arizona’s rights to the Arizona allotment, the Court rejected this argument because Congress had spoken definitively to the contrary.

A key element of the suit concerned the extent to which Arizona’s Gila River diversions should count toward its allocation in the Colorado River Compact and BCPA. The Supreme Court concluded that the BCPA and compact’s 7.5 MAF allocations within and between basins apply only to the mainstream of the Colorado River. Tributary allocations, such as from Arizona’s diversion of water from the Gila River, are governed under separate authorities.

As detailed in the Supreme Court’s opinion, Congress granted DOI the exclusive authority to enter into contracts with Lower Basin users to apportion stored water pursuant to BCPA Section 5. The resulting contracts determine how mainstream water is delivered to Lower Basin users. In the event of shortages, the Secretary of the Interior has discretion to determine how to divide the burden of shortages in the Lower Basin among the three states, within the parameters of the BCPA and water contracts. The Court clarified that DOI is not bound by a single approach to addressing shortages and acknowledged that one valid option could be to reduce lower basin deliveries proportionally to statutory allocations of the first 7.5 MAF (California 4.4/7.5, Arizona 2.8/7.5, and Nevada 0.3/7.5). DOI also has the authority and discretion to elect an alternate basis for apportioning shortages, subject to statutory constraints. These constraints include the congressionally directed priorities for uses of the dam and reservoir, as well as limitations reflected in statute or the Colorado River Compact.

Pursuant to Section 8 of the Reclamation Act of 1902 (32 Stat. 388), Reclamation is not to interfere with state laws “relating to the control, appropriation, use, or distribution of water used in irrigation,” and “the Secretary of the Interior, in carrying out provisions of the Act, shall proceed in conformance with such laws.” However, the Court in Arizona v. California noted that the Secretary must be able to manage the projects of the Colorado River Basin without being subject to “the varying, possibly inconsistent, commands of the different state legislatures.” The Court therefore construed the Secretary’s authority “to permit him, within the boundaries set down in the Act, to allocate and distribute the waters of the mainstream of the Colorado River.” Arizona, 373 U.S. at 587, 589–90.


In addition to the Central Arizona Project legislation discussed in the next section, Arizona v. California also addressed Gila River disputes between Arizona and New Mexico prior to reaching the mainstream, which is beyond the scope of this report.

As the court explained, BCPA §5 serves as the basis for DOI’s authority to apportion Lower Basin water deliveries.

Ibid. at 594 (allowing the Secretary, “in case of shortage,” to “adopt a method of proration” and to consider “priority of use, local laws and customs, or any other factors that might be helpful in reaching an informed judgment in harmony with the Act, the best interests of the Basin States, and the welfare of the Nation”).

Ibid. at 592–93.

Ibid. at 584 (referencing BCPA contract authority limitations including that irrigation and domestic uses are for “permanent service,” that nothing should disrupt compact-designated allocations between basins, and that reclamation law provisions generally apply unless Congress explicitly provides otherwise); c.f. BCPA, supra note 19.
In 1964, the Supreme Court issued a decree implementing its opinion in *Arizona v. California*. The decree has been updated multiple times since, most recently in 2006. The decree requires the United States to follow specific priorities for managing water flows from federal structures based on the BCPA. In the event flows are insufficient to provide 7.5 MAF per year to the Lower Basin, the decree instructs DOI to account for present perfected rights (i.e., water rights already in place at the time the Colorado River Compact became effective) in order of their priority dates. Additionally, the decree quantified water rights for five tribes, although it did not address any rights or priorities of any additional Indian Reservation. After consulting with states and “major” contracting parties, DOI has the authority to apportion flows pursuant to the BCPA and other statutes based on the following priority use order: (1) river regulation, navigation improvements, and flood control; (2) irrigation and domestic uses, including the satisfaction of present perfected rights; and (3) electric power. The decree also identifies specific quantities of present perfected rights and their date of recognition.

*Arizona v. California* continues to play a significant role in Colorado River allocations. Multiple federal statutes pertaining to Colorado River basin management refer to the *Arizona v. California* decree and codify its requirements. Following the decree, Arizona sought congressional authorization of a new project to access and convey its Colorado River supplies as provided for in the Supreme Court’s decree. Congress authorized that project in 1968, on the condition that California’s and Nevada’s water deliveries receive priority over Arizona’s during times of drought. 

### Upper Basin Compact and Colorado River Storage Project Authorizations

Congress did not allow projects originally authorized for study in the Upper Basin under BCPA to move forward with federally funded construction until the Upper Basin states determined their individual water allocations, which occurred under the Upper Colorado River Basin Compact of 1948. Because there was

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35 *Arizona v. California*, 376 U.S. 340 (1964). The 1964 decree determined, among other things, that all water in the mainstream of the Colorado River below Lee Ferry and within the United States would be “water controlled by the United States” and that the Secretary would release water under only three types of designations for a year: “normal, surplus, and shortage.”


37 *Arizona v. California*, 376 U.S. 340 (1964); 547 U.S. 150 (allowing for Colorado River water releases to satisfy Mexico treaty obligations “without regard” to the priorities specified in the BCPA as referenced in subdivision II(A) of the decree). 


39 *Arizona v. California*, 373 U.S. at 598–602. Indian reserved water rights were first recognized by the Supreme Court in *Winters v. United States*, 207 U.S. 564, 575–77 (1908). Under the Winters doctrine, when Congress reserves land (i.e., for an Indian reservation), it implicitly reserves water sufficient to fulfill the purpose of the reservation. Because the establishment of Indian reservations (and, therefore, of Indian water rights) generally predated large-scale development of water resources for non-Indian users, the water rights of tribes often are senior to those of non-Indian water rights. For more information on the resulting settlements, see below section, “Tribal Water Rights” and CRS Report R44148, *Indian Water Rights Settlements*.


41 *Ibid.* at 167–81 (2006). In sum, California, including tribal uses within the state, is entitled to approximately 3 MAF based on present perfected rights. Present perfected rights total approximately 1.05 MAF in Arizona and .000013 MAF in Nevada. California’s rights include Imperial Irrigation District rights to 2.6 MAF (priority date of 1901), Palo Verde Irrigation District rights to 0.2 MAF (priority date of 1877), tribal rights totaling approximately 0.16 MAF with priority dates ranging from 1873-1903, and an additional 0.04 MAF from other uses.

42 *Ibid.* at 167–81 (2006). In sum, California, including tribal uses within the state, is entitled to approximately 3 MAF based on present perfected rights. Present perfected rights total approximately 1.05 MAF in Arizona and .000013 MAF in Nevada. California’s rights include Imperial Irrigation District rights to 2.6 MAF (priority date of 1901), Palo Verde Irrigation District rights to 0.2 MAF (priority date of 1877), tribal rights totaling approximately 0.16 MAF with priority dates ranging from 1873-1903, and an additional 0.04 MAF from other uses.

43 *Upper Colorado River Basin Compact*, 1948.
some uncertainty as to the exact amount of water that would remain in the system after Lower Basin obligations were met, the Upper Basin Compact established state allocations in terms of percentage: Colorado (where the largest share of runoff to the river originates) is the largest entitlement holder in the Upper Basin, with rights to 51.75% of any Upper Basin flows after Colorado River Compact obligations to the Lower Basin have been met. Other states also received percentage-based allocations, including Wyoming (14%), New Mexico (11.25%), and Utah (23%). Arizona was allocated 50,000 AF in addition to its Lower Basin apportionment, in recognition of the portion of the state in the Upper Basin. Figure 2 shows basin allocations by state following approval of the Upper Basin Compact (i.e., the allocations that generally guide current water deliveries). The Upper Basin Compact also established the Upper Colorado River Commission, an interstate administrative water agency charged with administering the provisions of the Upper Basin Compact. \(^44\)

**Figure 2. Colorado River Basin Allocations**

(Shown as percentage of allocation or million acre-feet [MAF])

Source: Figure by the Congressional Research Service (CRS), using data from USGS, ESRI Data & Maps, 2017, Central Arizona Project, and ESRI World Shaded Relief Map.

\(^{44}\) For more information, see Upper Colorado River Commission, “About the UCRC,” at http://www.ucrcommission.com/about-us/.
Notes: Although both the Upper and Lower Basins were each allocated 7.5 MAF, there was uncertainty about how much water would remain in the Upper Basin after Colorado River Compact obligations to Lower Basin states were fulfilled. Therefore, outside of 50,000 AF provided annually to Arizona, the Upper Basin Compact includes apportionments in terms of percentage of the overall Upper Basin allocation.

Subsequent federal legislation paved the way for development of Upper Basin waters. The Colorado River Storage Project (CRSP) Act of 1956 authorized CRSP initial units of Glen Canyon, Flaming Gorge, Navajo, and Aspinall in the Upper Basin. The act also established the Upper Colorado River Basin Fund, which receives revenues collected in connection with the projects, to be made available for defraying the project’s costs of operation, maintenance, and emergency expenditures.

Colorado River Basin Project Act of 1968

The Colorado River Basin Project Act (CRBPA), enacted in 1968, authorized additional projects in both the Upper and Lower Basins and made other changes to basin management. In the CRBPA, Congress authorized a major new water conveyance project in Arizona, the Central Arizona Project (CAP), as well as several other Upper Basin projects (e.g., the Animas La Plata and Central Utah projects). The CRBPA also established funding mechanisms for revenues from power generation from relevant Upper and Lower Basin facilities to be used to fund specific expenses in each respective basin. The act also provided direction on how to address shortages in the Lower Basin when the Colorado River cannot supply annual consumptive use of 7.5 MAF in Arizona, California, and Nevada.

The CRBPA represented a legislative compromise between the interests of California and Arizona. The act authorized the CAP but provides that, in the event of shortage conditions, California’s 4.4 MAF allocation would have priority over CAP water supplies. Specifically, when there are shortages, the CRBPA directs that diversions to the CAP are to be limited to ensure sufficient consumptive use for certain California and Nevada users whose water rights predate the CAP, consistent with the 1964 Arizona v. California decree.

In addition, the CRBPA directs the Secretary of the Interior to develop a plan for meeting future water needs, develop criteria for operating federally authorized reservoirs in the basin to ensure that the reservoirs satisfy existing needs and legal obligations, and report annually on implementation of the plan. Section 602 of the CRBPA directs the Secretary of the Interior to consultatively develop operational criteria—known as Long-Range Operating Criteria (LROC)—for federally authorized Colorado River reservoirs in the following order of priority: (1) treaty obligations to Mexico, (2) the Colorado River Compact requirement for the Upper Basin to not deplete more than 75 MAF to Lower Basin states over any 10-year period, and (3) carryover storage to meet these needs. The Secretary of the

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45 See 43 U.S.C. §§1501–1556. The Central Arizona Project was authorized in 43 U.S.C. §1521. Some portions of the Colorado River Basin Project Act (CRBPA) were codified as amendments to the CRSPA. Ibid. §§620a, 620a-1.

46 Ibid.

47 See 43 U.S.C. §1525 (allowing for limitations to Arizona supplies sufficient to enable 4.4 MAF of annual consumption “by holders of present perfected rights, by other users in the State of California served under existing contracts with the United States by diversion works heretofore constructed, and by other existing Federal reservations in that State, and by users of the same character in Arizona and Nevada”). Note that the legislation references Section II(B)(1) of the Arizona v. California 1964 Supreme Court decree, 376 U.S. 340, which is associated with the 1963 opinion Section III, Apportionment and Contracts in Time of Shortage, 373 U.S. 546, 592-94. See also 43 U.S.C. §1521(b) (allowing modifications to Central Arizona Project diversions).

48 Ibid. §§1501(b), 1552.

49 Ibid. §1552(a)-(b). The Grand Canyon Protection Act (P.L. 102-575) directs DOI to operate Glen Canyon Dam in a specific manner. In addition to compliance with laws governing Colorado River water apportionment, DOI must adopt criteria and operating plans separate from and in addition to the ones specified in Section 602 of the CRBPA consistent with Grand Canyon (continued...)
Interior may modify the criteria based on “actual operating experience or unforeseen circumstances” after correspondence and consultation with representatives of the basin states. The Secretary of the Interior first adopted LROC in 1970; they were last modified in 2005.

**Water Storage and Operations**

The Colorado River Basin’s large water storage projects can store as much as 60 MAF, or about four times the Colorado River’s annual flows, to insulate water users from annual variability in flows. Thus, storage and operations in the basin receive considerable attention, particularly at the basin’s two largest dams and their storage reservoirs: Glen Canyon Dam/Lake Powell in the Upper Basin (26.2 MAF of storage capacity) and Hoover Dam/Lake Mead in the Lower Basin (26.1 MAF of storage capacity). The status of these projects is monitored closely by Reclamation and interested stakeholders as an indicator of basin health.

Glen Canyon Dam, completed in 1963 at the southern end of the Upper Basin, serves as the linchpin for Upper Basin storage and regulates flows from the Upper Basin to the Lower Basin, pursuant to the Colorado River Compact. From 2000 to 2020, it generated an average of approximately 3.8 billion kilowatt-hours (KWh) of electricity per year, which the Western Area Power Administration (WAPA) supplies to 5.8 million customers in Upper Basin States. Other significant storage in the Upper Basin includes the initial units of the CRSP: the Aspinall Unit in Colorado (including Blue Mesa, Crystal, and Morrow Point dams on the Gunnison River, with combined storage capacity of more than 1 MAF), the Flaming Gorge Unit in Utah (including Flaming Gorge Dam on the Green River, with a capacity of 3.8 MAF), and the Navajo Unit in New Mexico (including Navajo Dam on the San Juan River, with a capacity of 1 MAF). The Upper Basin is also home to 16 participating projects, which are authorized to use water for irrigation, M&I uses, and other purposes.

Hoover Dam, completed in 1936, provides the majority of the Lower Basin’s storage and generates on average about 4 billion KWh of electricity per year for customers in California, Arizona, and Nevada. Also important for Lower Basin Operations are Davis Dam/Lake Mohave, which regulates flows to Mexico under the 1944 Treaty, and Parker Dam/Lake Havasu, which impounds water for diversion into the Colorado River Aqueduct (thereby allowing for deliveries to urban areas in Southern California) and CAP (allowing for diversion to users in Arizona). Further downstream on the Arizona/California border,
Imperial Dam (a diversion dam) diverts Colorado River water to the All-American Canal for use in some of the river’s largest agricultural areas in California’s Imperial and Coachella Valleys.

**Annual Operations**

Reclamation monitors Colorado River reservoir levels and projects them 24 months into the future in monthly studies (called *24-month studies*). The studies take into account forecasted hydrology, reservoir operations, and diversion and consumptive use schedules to model a single scenario of reservoir conditions. The studies inform operating decisions by Reclamation looking one to two years into the future. They express water storage conditions at Lake Mead and Lake Powell in terms of elevation, as feet above mean sea level.

In addition to the 24-month studies, the CRBPA requires the Secretary of the Interior to transmit to Congress and the governors of the basin states, by January 1 of each year, an *Annual Operating Plan* (AOP). In the AOP, Reclamation describes the actual operation for the preceding operating year and the projected operation for the coming year. The AOP’s projected January 1 water conditions for the upcoming calendar year establish a baseline for future annual operations.

Since the adoption of operational guidelines by Reclamation and basin states in 2007 (see section, “2007 Interim Guidelines/Coordinated Operations for Lake Powell and Lake Mead”), Reclamation has tied operations of Hoover and Glen Canyon Dams to specific pool elevations at Lake Mead and Lake Powell. For Lake Mead, the first level of shortage (a *Tier One Shortage Condition*) in the 2007 guidelines, under which Arizona’s and Nevada’s allocations are curtailments (along with releases to Mexico), is triggered if the Lake Mead pool elevation falls below 1,075 feet. For Lake Powell, releases under tiered operations are based on storage levels in both Lake Powell and Lake Mead. Drought contingency plans (DCPs) for the Upper and Lower Basins, enacted in 2019, overlaid additional operational changes tied to elevations in both reservoirs, including a new *Tier Zero* shortage beginning at a higher reservoir elevation (up to 1,090 feet) and additional curtailments for other existing tiers (e.g., *Tier Two*, etc.). For Lake Powell, the Upper Basin DCP incorporated a Drought Response Operations Agreement (DROA) that established a target lake elevation of 3,525 feet. It also provided for altered releases from Glen Canyon Dam and Upper Basin reservoirs in order to protect Lake Powell from falling below an elevation that would no longer produce hydropower. These efforts are discussed more in the below section “Recent Developments and Agreements.”

**Recent Conditions**

Since 2020, falling water levels in Lake Mead resulted in Reclamation implementing Lower Colorado River Basin delivery curtailments for Arizona and Nevada in accordance with previous plans (Table 1). Water levels in 2020 triggered a Tier Zero reduction, as agreed to in the 2019 DCPs. In August 2021, Reclamation declared the first-ever Tier One Shortage Condition for the Lower Basin in 2022. In August

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57 Current 24-month studies, as well as two- and five-year probable projections of Lake Mead and Powell elevations, are available at Reclamation, “Colorado River System Projections Overview,” at https://www.usbr.gov/lc/region/g4000/riverops/coriver-projections.html.

58 The operating year for Glen Canyon Dam runs from October 1 through September 30; the operating year for Hoover Dam runs from January 1 through December 31.


60 See below section, “2019 Drought Contingency Plans.”

61 For more details, see below section, “Lower Basin Drought Contingency Plan.”

2022 Reclamation announced a Tier Two Shortage for 2023, resulting in further water delivery reductions. For 2024, Reclamation forecasted another year of operations under Tier One (i.e., fewer reductions than in 2023) as a result of improved hydrology and other conservation efforts. In 2022 and early 2023, Lake Powell fell below the target elevation of 3,525 feet, which had not occurred since the late 1960s. As of early 2024, combined storage in both reservoirs had increased relative to 2023 and was slightly lower than levels seen in 2021.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Operational Tier</th>
<th>Cumulative Delivery Curtailments by State in KAF (percentage of total deliveries)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2020</td>
<td>Zero</td>
<td>Arizona: 192 (6.8%) California: - Nevada: 8 (2.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2021</td>
<td>Zero</td>
<td>Arizona: 192 (6.8%) California: - Nevada: 8 (2.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2022</td>
<td>One</td>
<td>Arizona: 512 (18.2%) California: - Nevada: 21 (7.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2023</td>
<td>Two</td>
<td>Arizona: 592 (21.1%) California: - Nevada: 25 (8.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2024 (forecast)</td>
<td>One</td>
<td>Arizona: 512 (18.2%) California: - Nevada: 21 (7.0%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: CRS, based on information from the Bureau of Reclamation, 2019-2023.
Notes: The operating year for the Lower Basin runs from January 1 through December 31.

Mitigating the Environmental Effects of Colorado River Basin Development

Construction of most of the Colorado River’s water supply infrastructure predated major federal environmental protection statutes, such as the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA; 42 U.S.C. §§4321 et seq.) and the ESA. Thus, many of the environmental impacts associated with the development of basin resources were not originally taken into account. Over time, multiple efforts have been initiated to mitigate these effects. Some of the highest-profile efforts have been associated with water quality (in particular, salinity control) and the effects of facility operations on endangered and threatened species. These efforts are discussed below.

Salinity Control

Salinity and water quality are long-standing issues in the Colorado River Basin. Parts of the Upper Basin are covered by salt-bearing shale (which increases salt content of water inflows), and salinity content increases as the river flows downstream due to both natural leaching and return flows from agricultural irrigation. The 1944 U.S.-Mexico Water Treaty did not set water quality or salinity standards in the Colorado River Basin. After years of dispute between the United States and Mexico regarding the salinity...
of the water reaching Mexico’s border, the two countries reached an agreement on August 30, 1973, with the signing of Minute 242 of the International Boundary and Water Commission.\textsuperscript{66} The agreement guarantees Mexico that the average salinity of its treaty deliveries will be no more than 115 parts per million higher than the salinity content of the water diverted to the All-American Canal at Imperial Dam in Southern California. To control the salinity of Colorado River water in accordance with this agreement, Congress passed the Colorado River Basin Salinity Control Act of 1974, which authorized desalting and salinity control facilities to improve Colorado River water quality. The most prominent of these facilities is the Yuma Desalting Plant, which was largely completed in 1992 but has never operated at capacity due to cost and other factors.\textsuperscript{67} In 1974, the seven basin states also established water quality standards for salinity through the Colorado River Basin Salinity Control Forum.\textsuperscript{68}

**Endangered Species Efforts and Habitat Improvements**

Congress enacted the ESA in 1973. As the federal government listed some basin species under ESA in accordance with the act,\textsuperscript{69} federal agencies and nonfederal stakeholders consulted with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) to address the conservation of the listed species. As a result of these consultations, several major programs have been developed to protect and restore listed fish species on the Colorado River and its tributaries. Summaries of some of the key programs are below.

**Upper Colorado Endangered Fish Recovery Program**

The Upper Colorado Endangered Fish Recovery Program was established in 1988 to assist in the recovery of four species of endangered fish in the Upper Colorado River Basin.\textsuperscript{70} Congress formally authorized this program in 2000.\textsuperscript{71} The program is implemented through several stakeholders under a cooperative agreement signed by the governors of Colorado, Utah, and Wyoming; the Secretary of the Interior; and the Administrator of WAPA. The recovery goals of the program are to reduce threats to species and improve their status so they are eventually delisted from the ESA. Some of the actions taken in the past include providing adequate instream flows for fish and their habitat, restoring habitat, reducing nonnative fish, augmenting fish populations with stocked fish, and conducting research and monitoring. Reclamation is the lead federal agency for the program and provides the majority of federal funds for implementation. Other funding includes a portion of Upper Basin hydropower revenues from WAPA and funding from FWS; the states of Colorado, Wyoming, and Utah; and water users, among others.


\textsuperscript{67} The Yuma Desalting Plant’s limited operations have been due in part to the cost of its operations (desalination can require considerable electricity to operate) and surplus flows in the Colorado River during some years. In lieu of operating the plant, high-salinity irrigation water has been separated from the United States’ required deliveries to Mexico and disposed of through a canal that enters Mexico and discharges into wetlands called the Ciénega de Santa Clara, near the Gulf of California. Whether and how the plant should be operated and how the impacts on the Ciénega de Santa Clara from the untreated irrigation runoff should be managed remain topics of some debate in the basin and between Mexico and the United States.

\textsuperscript{68} Additional information on the forum and related salinity control efforts is available at Colorado River Basin, “Salinity Control Forum,” at https://www.coloradoriversalinity.org/.

\textsuperscript{69} Several listed species are found throughout the Colorado River Basin. Some are specifically found in the Colorado River, such as the Razorback sucker (*Xyrauchen texanus*), Bonytail chub (*Gila elegans*), Colorado pikeminnow (*Ptychocheilus Lucius*), and Humpback chub (*Gila cypha*). Consultation about an agency action’s effects on these species is required by 16 U.S.C. §1536(a).

\textsuperscript{70} The fish species are the humpback chub, bonytail, Colorado pikeminnow and razorback sucker. For more information, see Upper Colorado River Endangered Fish Recovery Program at http://www.coloradoriverrecovery.org/uc. For general background information on the Endangered Species Act (87 Stat. 884, 16 U.S.C. §§1531-1544), see CRS Report R46677, *The Endangered Species Act: Overview and Implementation.*

\textsuperscript{71} P.L. 106-392.
San Juan River Basin Recovery Implementation Program

The San Juan River Basin Recovery Implementation Program was established in 1992 to assist in the recovery of ESA-listed fish species on the San Juan River, the Colorado’s largest tributary. The program is a partnership implemented under a cooperative agreement between DOI and the states of Colorado and New Mexico, the Jicarilla Apache Nation, the Navajo Nation, the Southern Ute Indian Tribe, and the Ute Mountain Ute Indian Tribe. It is concerned with the recovery of the Razorback sucker (Xyrauchen texanus) and Colorado pikeminnow (Ptychocheilus Lucius). Congress authorized this program with the aim to protect the genetic integrity and population of listed species, conserve and restore habitat (including water quality), reduce nonnative species, and monitor species. The program is coordinated by FWS, and Reclamation is responsible for operating the Animas-La Plata Project and Navajo Dam on the San Juan River in a way that reduces effects on the fish populations. The program is funded by a portion of revenues from hydropower revenues from WAPA in the Upper Basin, Reclamation, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and participating states. Recovery efforts for listed fish are coordinated with the Upper Colorado Endangered Fish Recovery Program.

Glen Canyon Dam Adaptive Management Program

The Glen Canyon Dam Adaptive Management Program was established in 1997 in response to a directive from Congress under the Grand Canyon Protection Act of 1992 to operate Glen Canyon Dam “in such a manner as to protect, mitigate adverse impacts to, and improve the values for which Grand Canyon National Park and Glen Canyon National Recreation Area were established.” This program uses experiments to determine how water flows affect natural resources south of the dam. Reclamation is in charge of modifying flows for experiments, and the U.S. Geological Survey conducts monitoring and other studies to evaluate the effects of the flows. The results are expected to better inform managers how to provide water deliveries and conserve species.

Lower Colorado Multi-Species Conservation Program

The Multi-Species Conservation Program (MSCP) is a multistakeholder initiative to conserve 27 species (8 listed under ESA) along the Lower Colorado River while maintaining water and power supplies for farmers, tribes, industries, and urban residents. The MSCP began in 2005 and is planned to last for at least 50 years. The MSCP was created through consultation under ESA. To achieve compliance under ESA, federal entities involved in managing water supplies in the Lower Colorado River Basin met with resource agencies from Arizona, California, and Nevada; Native American Tribes; environmental groups; and recreation interests to develop a program to conserve species along a portion of the Colorado River. A biological opinion (BiOp) issued by the FWS in 1997 covers operations and maintenance activities conducted by Reclamation along the Colorado River from Lake Mead to the Southerly International

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73 It also includes participation by water development interests in Colorado and New Mexico.


75 Regardless of the status and results of flow experiments, the total annual volume of water released from Glen Canyon Dam remains dictated by the Law of the River, as described above.

76 The stakeholders include 6 federal and state agencies, 6 tribes, and 36 cities and water and power authorities. Stakeholders serve more than 20 million residents in the region, and irrigate 2 million acres of farmland. For more information, see Lower Colorado River Multi-Species Conservation Program at https://www.lcrmscp.gov/.

77 The program was authorized under Subtitle E of Title IX of P.L. 111-11.
Boundary; consultation was reinitiated in 2002, and a new BiOp was issued later that year. Nonfederal stakeholders also applied and received an incidental take permit under Section 10(a) of the ESA for their activities. This resulted in a habitat conservation plan for the MSCP that formed the basis for the program. A Lower Colorado River Multi-Species Conservation Program Implementing Agreement integrated the federal and nonfederal activities in the MSCP and was signed by stakeholders in 2005.

The objective of the MSCP is to create habitat for listed species, augment the populations of species listed under ESA, maintain current and future water diversions and power production, and abide by the incidental take authorizations for listed species under the ESA. In 2003, the estimated total cost of the program over its lifetime was approximately $626 million, split evenly between Reclamation (50%) and the states of California, Nevada, and Arizona (who collectively fund the remaining 50%). The management and implementation of the MSCP is the responsibility of Reclamation, in consultation with a steering committee of stakeholders.

### Hydropower Revenues Funding Colorado River Basin Activities

Hydropower revenues finance a number of activities throughout the Colorado River Basin. In the Lower Basin, the Colorado River Dam Fund uses power revenues generated by the Boulder Canyon Project (i.e., Hoover Dam) to fund operational and construction costs for related Reclamation facilities. A separate fund, the Lower Colorado River Basin Development Fund, collects revenues from the Central Arizona Project (CAP), as well as from a surcharge on revenues from the Boulder Canyon and Parker-Davis Projects that was enacted under the Hoover Power Plant Act of 1984 (P.L. 98-381). These revenues are available without further appropriation toward defraying CAP operation and maintenance costs, salinity control efforts, and funding for Indian water rights settlements identified under the Arizona Water Settlements Act of 2004 (i.e., funding for water systems of the Gila River Indian Community and the Tohono O’odham Nation, among others). In the Upper Basin, the Upper Colorado River Basin Fund collects revenues from the initial units of the Colorado River Storage Project and funds operation and maintenance expenses, salinity control, the Glen Canyon Dam Adaptive Management Program, and endangered fish studies on the Colorado and San Juan rivers, among other things.

**Source:** Department of the Interior, Department of the Interior Budget Appendix, Fiscal Year 2023 Budget Request.

### Tribal Water Rights

Tribal water rights are often senior to other uses on the Colorado River. Tribal water diversions based on these rights typically come out of individual state allocations. There are 30 federally recognized tribes in the Colorado River Basin, many of whom have settled or unresolved (i.e., currently claimed for use but unsettled) tribal water rights. As of early 2023, 11 basin tribes had reserved (i.e., held for future use) water rights claims that have not been quantified and settled; the total potential amount of these claims is

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79 The incidental take permit is valid for 50 years from its date of issuance and covers the implementation of the Lower Colorado River Multi-Species Conservation Program, diversions of water from the river, demand for and receipt of hydropower, and flow and non-flow actions along the Colorado River with the geographic scope of the permit.


82 Tribal water rights claims typically arise out of the right of many tribes to water resources dating to treaties establishing their reservations. These water rights are often senior to those of non-Indian water rights holders because they date to the creation of the reservation (i.e., prior to the awarding of most state water rights). For more information on Indian water rights settlements, see CRS Report R44148, *Indian Water Rights Settlements*.

83 For a list of the tribes, see Bureau of Reclamation, “Colorado River Basin,” at https://www.usbr.gov/ColoradoRiverBasin/.
unknown. According to Reclamation, as of December 2020, tribes held diversion rights to approximately 3.4 MAF per year of Colorado River water. Previous studies noted that these tribes were using just over half of their quantified rights.

Because of the magnitude and seniority of tribal water rights, future decisions about the settlement and development of tribal water rights in the Colorado River Basin are likely to influence the availability of basin water resources for various uses. Increased consumptive water use by tribes with existing quantified and settled water rights, and/or future settlement of claims and additional consumptive use of basin waters by tribes with reserved rights, would exacerbate competition for basin water resources. At the same time, some tribes have entered into arrangements to lease or conserve their waters to other users; new agreements along these lines have the potential to secure water supplies for some non-tribal users without other viable alternative sources of water.

**Drought and the Supply/Demand Imbalance**

The Colorado River Compact was based on the assumption (formed by the available record at the time) that average annual flows on the river were 16.4 MAF per year. However, actual flows have been considerably less than that (and have dropped further during the ongoing drought). In most years, consumptive uses and losses (e.g., evaporation) of Colorado River waters exceed the river’s natural flows. This condition—referred to as the structural deficit—leads to a drawdown of basin reservoirs. Consumptive use in the basin generally increased from 1971 to 2002 but declined after the 2003 approval of the Quantitative Settlement Agreement (QSA), which led to a decrease of consumptive use in the Lower Basin (see below section, “Recent Developments and Agreements”). In recent years, demand has dropped further, although the ongoing drought has continued to stress water supplies.

The lack of a formal mechanism accounting for evaporative losses in the Lower Basin exacerbates the supply/demand disparity. A key difference between Upper and Lower Basin reporting involves how each basin accounts for consumptive use. In accordance with Articles I and V of the Arizona v. California decree, a Lower Basin Water Accounting Report (published annually) reports only on diversions from the system for consumptive use. Conversely, the comparable Upper Basin accounting—the Upper Basin Consumptive Use and Losses Report (published every five years)—is prepared in response to congressional direction in the CRBPA, which directed “a detailed breakdown of the beneficial

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84 CRS analysis of enacted Indian water rights settlements and Bureau of Reclamation, *Colorado River Basin Water Supply and Demand Study*, Technical Report C- Water Demand Assessment, Appendix C9, Tribal Water Demand Scenario Quantification, Dec. 2012, pp. C9-33–C9-34. Tribes with claims yet to be fully adjudicated or quantified as of early 2023 include the Navajo Nation; the Ute Indian Tribe of the Uintah and Ouray Reservation; the Havasupai Tribe; the Hopi Tribe; the Kaibab Band of Paiute Indians; the Pascua Yąqui Tribe; San Carlos Apache Tribe; the San Juan Southern Paiute Tribe; the Tohono O’odham Nation; Tonto Apache Tribe; and the Yavapai Apache Nation.


86 Colorado River Research Group, *Tribes and Water in the Colorado River Basin*, June 2016. According to this study, tribal consumptive use in 2015 (including leasing of tribal water to non-tribal entities) totaled 1.7 MAF of the 2.9 MAF in recognized diversion rights at that time.


88 Consumptive use in the Lower Basin (excluding tributaries and evaporative losses) was in excess of 8.4 MAF in 2002 but had decreased to 6.8 MAF as of 2020.

89 See footnote 25.
consumptive use of water on a State-by-State basis.” Reclamation defines beneficial consumptive use to include any removal from the system for beneficial consumptive use, which Reclamation defines to include both diversions and losses from mainstream reservoir evaporation that occur prior to diversions. Thus, even though Lower Basin consumptive use is typically below the compact threshold of 7.5 MAF, the total amount of water regularly exceeds this threshold, after accounting for evaporative losses. Studies have concluded that Colorado River flows are unlikely to return to 20th century averages and that future water supply risk is high. Overall, natural flows have declined by approximately 20% over the last century, and one study attributed more than half of this decline to increasing temperatures resulting from climate change. Although there is potential for some precipitation increases in the region due to climate change, such potential increases are not expected to counteract projected drying resulting from rising temperatures. As a result, most research has projected continuing reduction in runoff through the mid-21st century.

Recent Developments and Agreements

Drought conditions throughout the basin have raised concerns about potential negative impacts on water supplies. Concerns center on what sort of changes to the current water management regime might result if the Secretary of the Interior were to determine that a shortage condition exists in the Lower Basin. Some in Upper Basin States are also concerned about the potential for a compact call of Lower Basin states on Upper Basin states. This is the commonly used term for the hypothetical attempt of Lower Basin states to force deliveries of Colorado River water under the compact. Drought and other uncertainties related to water rights priorities (e.g., potential tribal water rights claims) spurred the development of several efforts that generally attempted to relieve pressure on basin water supplies, stabilize storage levels, and provide assurances of available water supplies. Some of the most prominent developments since the year 2000 (i.e., the beginning of the current drought) are discussed below.

2003 Quantitative Settlement Agreement

Prior to the 2003 finalization of the QSA, California had been using approximately 5.2 MAF of Colorado River on average each year (with most of its excess water use attributed to urban areas). Under the QSA, which is an agreement between several California water districts and DOI, California agreed to reduce its use to the required 4.4 MAF under the Law of the River. It sought to accomplish this aim by quantifying

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94 Milly and Dunne, “Colorado River Flow Dwindles.”
97 California Quantification Settlement Agreement by and Among Imperial Irrigation District, the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, and Coachella Valley Water District, October 10, 2003.
Colorado River entitlement levels of several water contractors; authorizing efforts to conserve additional water supplies (e.g., the lining of the All-American Canal); and providing for several large-scale, long-term agriculture-to-urban water transfers. The QSA also committed the state to a path toward restoration and mitigation related to the Salton Sea in Southern California.98

A related agreement between Reclamation and the Lower Basin states, the Inadvertent Overrun and Payback Policy (IOPP), went into effect concurrently with the QSA in 2004.99 IOPP is an administrative mechanism that provides an accounting of inadvertent overruns in consumptive use compared to the annual entitlements of water users in the Lower Basin. These overruns must be “paid back” in the calendar year following the overruns, and the paybacks must be made only from “extraordinary conservation measures” above and beyond normal consumptive use.100

2004 Arizona Water Settlements Act

The 2004 Arizona Water Settlements Act (AWSA) altered the allocation of CAP water in Arizona. It ratified three water rights settlements (one in each title) between the federal government and the State of Arizona, the Gila River Indian Community (GRIC), and the Tohono O’odham Nation, respectively.101 For the state and its CAP water users, the settlement resolved a final repayment cost for CAP by reducing the water users’ reimbursable repayment obligation from about $2.3 billion to $1.7 billion. Additionally, Arizona agreed to new tribal and non-tribal allocations of CAP water so that approximately half of CAP’s annual allotment would be available to Native American tribes in Arizona, at a higher priority than most other uses. The tribal communities were authorized to lease the water, so long as the water remains within the state via the state’s water banking authority. The act authorized funds to cover the cost of infrastructure required to deliver the water to the Indian communities, much of it derived from power receipts accruing to the Lower Colorado River Basin Development Fund. It also authorized funding for the study of a potential New Mexico Unit of CAP.

2007 Interim Guidelines/Coordinated Operations for Lake Powell and Lake Mead

Another development in the basin was the 2007 adoption of the Colorado River Interim Guidelines for Lower Basin Shortages and the Coordinated Operations for Lake Powell and Lake Mead (2007 Interim Guidelines). DOI developed the guidelines to implement the LROC, through issuance of the Annual Operating Plan for Colorado River Reservoirs (AOP), as directed by the 1968 CRBPA.102 Development of the agreement began in 2005, when, in response to drought in the Southwest and the decline in basin water storage, the Secretary of the Interior instructed Reclamation to develop coordinated strategies for

98 The Salton Sea is an inland water body in Southern California that was historically sustained by Colorado River irrigation runoff from the Imperial and Coachella Valleys, but is shrinking. Toxic dust from exposed seabed is a major concern for surrounding areas. For more information on the Salton Sea, see CRS Report R46625, Salton Sea Restoration.


100 Ibid.

101 Congress passed the Colorado River Basin Project Act of 1968 and authorized construction of CAP despite significant uncertainty related to tribal water rights related to the Colorado River. The Gila River, Arizona’s largest tributary of the Colorado River, runs directly through the Gila River Indian Community, which encompasses approximately 372,000 acres south of and adjacent to Phoenix. Additionally, the Tohono O’odham Nation possessed reserved water rights near Tucson with the potential to disrupt that city’s water supplies.

Colorado River reservoir operations during drought or shortages. The resulting guidelines included criteria for releases from Lakes Mead and Powell determined by “trigger levels” in both reservoirs, as well as a schedule of Lower Basin curtailments at different operational tiers. For Lake Powell, preset inflow measurements determine the reservoir’s annual operational “balancing” tier and resulting releases to Lake Mead. In the Lower Basin, the guidelines stipulated that Arizona and Nevada, which have junior rights to California, receive reduced allocations if Lake Mead elevations dropped below 1,075 feet. At the time, it was thought that the 2007 Guidelines would significantly reduce the risk of Lake Mead falling to an elevation of 1,025 feet.

The 2007 agreement also included for the first time a mechanism by which parties in the Lower Basin were able to store conserved water in Lake Mead, known as Intentionally Created Surplus (ICS). Reclamation accounts for this water annually, and the users storing the water may access the surplus in future years, in accordance with the Law of the River. As of the end of calendar year 2022, the portion of Lake Mead water in storage that was classified as ICS was 3.04 MAF. That is, as of the end of the 2022, approximately one-third of the water stored in Lake Mead was previously conserved ICS volume.

The 2007 guidelines are considered “interim” because they are scheduled to expire in 20 years (i.e., at the end of 2026). Thus, Reclamation began coordinating a review on the effectiveness of the 2007 guidelines in 2020, and in 2022, formally initiated the review process for post-2026 operations. The review is expected to encompass negotiations related to renewal of the Upper and Lower Basin DCPs, which are an overlay on the 2007 guidelines (see below section, “2019 Drought Contingency Plans”).

**System Conservation Program**

In 2014, Reclamation and several major basin water supply agencies (Central Arizona Water Conservation District, Southern Nevada Water Authority, Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, and Denver Water) executed a memorandum of understanding to provide funding for voluntary conservation projects and reductions of water use. The activities outlined in the memorandum had the goal of developing new system water, to be applied toward storage in Lake Mead, by the end of 2019. Congress formally authorized federal participation in these efforts, known as the Pilot System Conservation Program, in the Energy and Water Development and Related Agencies Appropriations Act, 2015 (P.L. 113-235, Division D). The Energy and Water Development and Related Agencies Appropriations Act, 2019 (P.L. 115-244, Division A) extended the authority through the end of FY2022, with the stipulation that Upper Basin agreements could not proceed without the participation of the Upper Basin states through the Upper Colorado River Commission. The authority was most recently extended through FY2024 in Division CC of the Consolidated Appropriations Act, FY2023 (P.L. 117-328).

Reclamation estimated that as of the end of 2019, the Lower Basin program had conserved more than

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103 Prior to this time, the Secretary of the Interior had the authority to declare a shortage, but no shortage criteria had been publicly announced or published. (Criteria for surplus operations were put in place in 2001.)


106 *System water* refers to water that is provided to increase water supplies as a whole, without being directed toward additional consumptive use for specific contractors or water users.

175,000 AF of water in Lake Mead, at an average cost of $170 per AF.\textsuperscript{108} Additional projects also were carried out in the Upper Basin by the Upper Colorado River Basin Commission; these efforts ended in 2018.\textsuperscript{109}

**Minute 319 and Minute 323 Agreements with Mexico\textsuperscript{110}**

In 2017, the United States and Mexico signed Minute 323, which extended and replaced elements of a previous agreement signed in 2012—Minute 319—related to implementation of the 1944 U.S.-Mexico Water Treaty.\textsuperscript{111} Minute 323 includes, among other things, options for Mexico to hold water in reserve in U.S. reservoirs for emergencies and water conservation efforts, as well as U.S. commitments for flows to support the ecological health of the Colorado River Delta. It also extended the initial Mexican reduction commitments made under Minute 319 (which were similar in structure to the 2007 reductions negotiated for Lower Basin states) and established a Binational Water Scarcity Contingency Plan that included additional reductions that would be triggered if DCPs are approved by U.S. basin states (see the following section, “2019 Drought Contingency Plans”).

**2019 Drought Contingency Plans**

Ongoing drought conditions and the potential for water supply shortages prompted discussions and negotiations focused on how to conserve additional basin water supplies. After several years of negotiations, on March 19, 2019, Reclamation and the Colorado River Basin states finalized DCPs for both the Upper Basin and the Lower Basin. These plans, which are an overlay of the 2007 Interim Guidelines discussed above, required final authorization by Congress to be implemented. Congress approved the plans on April 16, 2019, in the Colorado River Drought Contingency Plan Authorization Act. Similar to the 2007 guidelines, these plans are scheduled to be in place through 2026. At the time of their enactment, the combined efforts represented by the DCPs were expected to cut the risk of Colorado River reservoirs reaching critically low elevations by approximately 50%.\textsuperscript{112} Each of the basin-level DCPs is discussed below in more detail.

**Upper Basin Drought Contingency Plan**

The Upper Basin DCP aims to protect against Lake Powell reaching critically low elevations through coordinated Upper Basin reservoir operations. It also authorizes storage of conserved water in the Upper Basin that would serve as the foundation for a water use reduction effort (i.e., a Demand Management Program) that may be developed in the future.\textsuperscript{113}

Under the Upper Basin DCP’s Drought Response Operations Agreement (DROA), the Upper Basin states agree to operate system units to keep the surface of Lake Powell above 3,525 feet, which is 35 feet above

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\textsuperscript{109} For more information, see Upper Colorado River Commission, “System Conservation Pilot Program,” at http://www.ucrcommission.com/system-conservation-pilot-program/.


\textsuperscript{111} International Boundary & Water Commission, “Minutes Between the United States and Mexican Sections of the IBWC,” at https://www.ibwc.gov/Treaties_Minutes/Minutes.html.


\textsuperscript{113} While such a mechanism exists for the Lower Basin, a comparable program has not been developed in the Upper Basin.
“minimum power pool” (i.e., 3,490 feet, the minimum elevation needed to run the dam’s hydroelectric plant). Under DROA, the two main mechanisms to do this are altering the timing of releases from Glen Canyon Dam and operating “initial unit” reservoirs on the mainstream of the Colorado River (e.g., Navajo Reservoir, Blue Mesa Reservoir, and Flaming Gorge Reservoir) to protect Lake Powell elevations, potentially through storage drawdown. Operational changes may occur either through DROA’s emergency provisions, which allow the Secretary of the Interior to make supplemental water deliveries at his or her discretion (after consultation with basin states), or through a planning process establishing formal triggers for Upper Basin water deliveries to Lake Powell, based on agreed-upon hydrological targets.

The other primary component of the Upper Basin DCP, the Upper Basin DCP Demand Management Program, has not been formally established. It would entail willing seller/buyer agreements allowing for temporary paid reductions in water use that would provide for more storage volume in Lake Powell. As noted, the Upper Colorado River Commission operated an Upper Basin System Conservation Pilot Program from 2015 to 2018; that program compensated water users for temporary, voluntary efforts that resulted in additional water conserved in Lake Powell. A future Upper Basin DCP Demand Management Program may expand on some of those efforts.

Due to falling lake levels, Reclamation implemented drought response operations under DROA that led to reduced storage in other Upper Basin mainstream reservoirs in 2021 and 2022.114 Separately, Reclamation also began planning efforts under DROA, known as the Drought Response Operations Plan, and approved this plan in 2022.115 More recently, improved hydrology has boosted Lake Powell storage (Figure 3).

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114 For example, in 2021, 180,000 AF was transferred to Lake Powell from Flaming Gorge Reservoir (125,000 AF), Blue Mesa Reservoir (36,000 AF), and Navajo Reservoir (20,000 AF).

Lower Basin Drought Contingency Plan

The Lower Basin DCP is designed to require Arizona, California, and Nevada to curtail deliveries and thereby contribute additional water to Lake Mead storage at predetermined “trigger” elevations. It is also designed to create additional flexibility to incentivize voluntary conservation of water to be stored in Lake Mead, thereby increasing lake levels. Under the DCP, Nevada and Arizona (which were already set to have their supplies curtailed beginning at 1,075 feet under the 2007 Interim Guidelines) have committed to contributing additional supplies to maintain higher lake levels (i.e., beyond previous commitments). These reductions begin at 1,090 feet and would reach their maximums when reservoir levels drop below 1,025 feet. The Lower Basin DCP includes—for the first time—delivery reductions for California. These curtailments begin with a 200,000 AF delivery reduction at Lake Mead elevations between 1,040 and 1,045 feet and would increase by 50,000 AF for each additional 5-foot drop in Lake Mead elevation below 1,040 feet, to as much as 350,000 AF at elevations of 1,025 feet or lower. The curtailments are categorized in terms of tiers (also sometimes referred to as levels), with Tier One shortage conditions the term adopted for elevations from 1,050-1,075 feet, and Tier Two shortage conditions the term for elevations between 1,025 feet and 1,050 feet.

The curtailments in the Lower Basin DCP are in addition to those agreed to under the 2007 Interim Guidelines and under Minute 323 with Mexico. Specific and cumulative delivery reductions prior to the latest round of reductions agreed to in 2024 (see below section, “Near-Term Operations: 2023/2024 Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement”) are shown in Table 2. In addition to the state-level reductions, under the Lower Basin DCP Reclamation also agreed to pursue efforts to add 100,000 AF or more of system water within the basin. Some of the largest and most controversial reductions under the
Lower Basin DCP were committed to by Arizona, where pursuant to previous changes under the 2004 AWSA, a large group of agricultural users were already facing major reductions to their CAP water supplies prior to the enactment of DCP.
# Table 2. Lower Basin Water Delivery Curtailment Volumes Prior to 2024
(values in thousand acre-feet)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lake Mead Elevation (ft)</th>
<th>2007 Interim Shortage Guidelines</th>
<th>Minute 323 Delivery Reductions</th>
<th>DCP Curtailment</th>
<th>Binational Water Scarcity Conting. Plan</th>
<th>Total Volume of Curtailment (% of Lower Colorado River Apportionment)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>AZ</td>
<td>NV</td>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>AZ</td>
<td>NV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1,090 -&gt; 1,075</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>192</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1,075 -&gt; 1,050</td>
<td>320</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>192</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1,050 -&gt; 1,045</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>192</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1,045 -&gt; 1,040</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>240</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1,040 -&gt; 1,035</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>240</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1,035 -&gt; 1,030</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>240</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1,030 - 1,025</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>240</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;1,025</td>
<td>480</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>240</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Sources:** Table by CRS, using data in the 2007 Interim Shortage Guidelines, Minute 323 between Mexico and the United States, Lower Basin Drought Contingency Plan, and the Binational Water Scarcity Contingency Plan in Minute 323 between Mexico and the United States.

In 2019, at the time of the passage of the Colorado River Drought Contingency Plan Authorization Act, Reclamation asserted that the Lower Basin DCP would significantly reduce the risk of Lake Mead elevations falling below critical elevation of 1,020 feet. Combined with the commitments from Mexico, total planned reductions under shortage scenarios (i.e., all commitments to date, combined) were expected to decrease Lower Basin consumptive use by 241,000 AF to 1.375 MAF per year, depending on the curtailments triggered by Lake Mead’s elevation. Despite these efforts, Lake Mead has continued to decline since the Lower Basin DCP was finalized, and is projected to continue to decline despite improved hydrology in 2023 (Figure 4). These developments have triggered additional Lower Basin conservation efforts.

**Figure 4. Lake Mead End of Month Elevation Projections**

(January/March 2024 24-month study inflow scenarios)


Notes: WY = Water Year; DROA = Drought Response Operations Agreement.

**Near-Term Operations: 2023/2024 Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement**

Ongoing declines in Lake Mead and Powell highlighted the need for additional “near-term” operational changes prior to the expiration of existing agreements in 2026. At a June 14, 2022, Senate hearing, the Commissioner of Reclamation announced that basin states would need to conserve an additional 2-4 MAF to protect Lake Mead and Lake Powell storage volumes over the

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116 2019 House Natural Resources DCP Hearing.

117 For a summary of the curtailments that add up to this amount, see “1,090 - >1,075” row of Table 2.
2023–2026 period. The Commissioner noted that if the targets were not met with voluntary actions by the states by August 2022, DOI was prepared to act unilaterally. No major water savings commitments were announced in response to Reclamation’s June statement.

In late October 2022, Reclamation announced its intent to revise the 2007 Interim Guidelines in 2023 and 2024 (i.e., prior to post-2026 operational changes to the guidelines, which are proceeding separately) to address continued low runoff conditions in the basin. As part of this process, Reclamation published in the Federal Register its notice of intent to prepare a supplemental environmental impact statement (SEIS) for changes to the 2007 Interim Guidelines in three areas: Lake Mead operations during shortage conditions, coordinated operation of Lake Powell and Lake Mead, and midyear review for implementation of the operational guidelines. As part of this process, Reclamation solicited proposals in these areas from the basin states, with a preference for “consensus” proposals.

On January 31, 2023, all of the basin states except California responded to Reclamation’s notice with a combined proposal (the Six State Proposal), while California submitted its own proposal (the California Proposal) separately. The Six State Proposal requested that Reclamation model in its SEIS 1.543–1.943 MAF per year in new delivery reductions on Lower Colorado River Basin contractors, to be implemented through two mechanisms. First, reductions to account for 1.543 MAF of evaporative losses would be allocated among Lower Basin contractors and Mexico, and would be assessed at most Lake Mead elevations based on stream reach (i.e., position in the basin relative to bodies of water affected by evaporation) and recent consumptive use levels. Second, additional operational tier changes and delivery reductions are tied to Lake Mead elevations of 1,050 feet and lower. For its part, the California Proposal would have included 1.0–1.95 MAF per year in new delivery reductions for Lower Basin contractors (i.e., not based on evaporation), depending on Lake Mead elevations. Both state proposals also suggested changes to Lake Powell’s operational tiers to allow more water to be left in that reservoir, although they would do so in different ways.


119 2022 Drought Hearing.

120 In a July 18, 2022, letter to Reclamation, the Upper Colorado River Commission declined to contribute a specific volume of reductions to these efforts, and instead laid out a five-point plan as the basis for its water conservation efforts. Letter from Charles Cullom, Director, Upper Colorado River Commission, to Camille Touton, Commissioner, U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, July 18, 2022, at http://www.ucrcommission.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/2022-July-18-Letter-to-Reclamation.pdf.


124 This amount also assumes the assessment of evaporative losses on Mexico.

125 Six State Proposal. These reductions would move the current Tier Three reduction schedule (which begins at 1,025 feet) up to a Lake Mead elevation of 1,050 feet, and would institute additional delivery reductions at Lake Mead elevations of 1,030 feet or lower.
Reclamation released multiple iterations of its draft SEIS in 2023. In April, it released a draft with modeling for a “no action” alternative and two action alternatives. Both alternatives would have imposed an equal amount of new reductions in 2024 tied to Lake Mead elevations, with the primary difference being the approach for apportioning reductions; Action Alternative 1 assumed reductions based on priority order of water rights (i.e., large curtailments [in terms of percentage] for Arizona and Nevada), whereas Action Alternative 2 assumed the Secretary would use existing federal authorities to impose the same percentage-based delivery reductions on all Lower Basin users (i.e., without regard to senior water rights in California). Outside of the approach to Lower Basin shortage operations, the SEIS action alternatives included similar options in other areas.

On May 22, 2023, DOI announced a consensus-based proposal in which the three Lower Basin states would conserve a total of 3 MAF prior to 2026, with 2.3 MAF of these reductions compensated by the federal government via $4.0 billion in previously appropriated funds in budget reconciliation legislation commonly referred to as the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA; P.L. 117-169). This proposal included total curtailments of at least 3.0 MAF in operating years 2023 through 2026, on top of existing contributions. The states requested, and DOI agreed, to temporarily withdraw the April draft SEIS. Reclamation released a new draft SEIS in October 2023 and formally adopted the consensus-based alternative on March 5, 2024. Table 3 shows state-level commitments before and after the SEIS.

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127 The Supreme Court has determined the Secretary of the Interior is not bound by a single approach to addressing Colorado River supply shortages in the Lower Basin. See Arizona v. California, 373 U.S. at 593. The Court stated that the Secretary may consider reducing Lower Basin deliveries proportionally to statutory allocations of the first 7.5 MAF (California 4.4/7.5, Arizona 2.8/7.5, and Nevada 0.3/7.5), but the Secretary also has the authority and discretion to elect an alternate basis for apportioning shortages, subject to statutory constraints. Ibid., pp. 592-593.

128 For instance, both alternatives proposed altering Lake Powell releases so that at lower Lake Powell levels, releases would be below the compact’s required average of 7.5 MAF per year (potentially as low as 6.0 MAF per year). At Lake Powell elevations between 3,500 and 3,525 feet, releases to the Lower Basin would be maintained at 6.0 MAF. At elevations below 3,500 feet, releases could be further reduced.


130 Ibid.

Table 3. Comparison of Colorado River Curtailments Before and After 2024 Supplemental EIS
(curtailment amounts in thousand acre-feet [KAF])

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>AZ</td>
<td>NV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1,090 - 1,075</td>
<td>192</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1,075 - 1,050</td>
<td>512</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1,050 - 1,045</td>
<td>592</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1,045 - 1,040</td>
<td>640</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1,040 - 1,035</td>
<td>640</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1,035 - 1,030</td>
<td>640</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1,030 - 1,025</td>
<td>640</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;1,025</td>
<td>640</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Long-Term/Post-2026 Operations

Parallel to the process analyzing near-term operational changes, in 2022, Reclamation initiated efforts to study and recommend alternatives for long-term (post-2026) operations on the Colorado River. The post-2026 operational planning process aims to identify a range of alternatives to be employed in Colorado River management for decades into the future. If basin interests fail to come to an agreement on post-2026 operational terms, the federal government, through the Secretary of the Interior, may opt to propose such terms on a unilateral basis (i.e., similar to what DOI initially proposed in the spring of 2023 for near-term operations).


133 The Boulder Canyon Project Act of 1928 made the Secretary of the Interior responsible for the distribution (via contract) of all Colorado River water delivered below Hoover Dam (i.e., the Lower Basin), and authorized such regulations as necessary to enter into these contracts. Subsequent court decisions confirmed the Secretary’s power to (continued...)
Comparison of Recent Long-Term Colorado River Operational Proposals

Despite reportedly lengthy negotiations, Upper and Lower Basin states were unable to agree on a consensus-based plan for post-2026 operations in early 2024. As a result, the Upper and Lower Basins submitted competing plans to Reclamation in March 2024. Reclamation is engaging in modeling of these and other operational alternatives. The Upper and Lower Basin alternatives are discussed in detail below.

Upper Basin Alternative

The Upper Basin States of Colorado, New Mexico, Utah, and Wyoming submitted their operational alternative to Reclamation on March 5, 2024. The Upper Basin’s proposal departs from the current operational regime by using combined storage in Lake Powell and Lake Mead to determine a trigger for Lower Basin delivery reductions (as opposed to only Lake Mead storage levels dictating said reductions). The alternative does not propose any explicit Upper Basin delivery reductions.

For Lower Basin delivery reductions, the new trigger would be based on a metric that combines live Lake Mead and Lake Powell storage with “threshold volumes” in each reservoir:

\[
\frac{\text{Current Live Storage} - \text{Threshold Volume}}{\text{Total Live Storage} - \text{Threshold Volume}} \times 100 = \text{Trigger}
\]

This trigger would result in a schedule of Lower Basin delivery reductions that phases in linearly beginning at 90% and ranges up to 3.9 million AF at the lowest reservoir levels (Table 4).

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134 In addition to the Upper and Lower Basin alternatives, other entities have submitted long-term operational alternatives to the federal government. For example, a coalition of conservation organizations known as the Water for Colorado Coalition submitted its operational alternative, referred to as the Cooperative Conservation Alternative, to Reclamation on March 29, 2024. For more information, see https://waterforcolorado.org/the-cooperative-conservation-alternative/.

135 Referred to as the Upper Basin Alternative.

136 Live storage refers to active storage minus deadpool storage (i.e., water that cannot be accessed). Threshold volume in this context is based on the volume of water in each reservoir that is required to avoid deadpool status at each reservoir (i.e., the level at which stored water can no longer be released through dam outlet works). The threshold volumes assumed for the Upper Basin’s alternative are 4.5 million AF for Lake Mead and 4.2 million AF for Lake Powell, or a combined total of 8.7 million AF.

137 Upper Basin Alternative, p. 3.
Table 4. 2024 Upper Basin Alternative: Lower Basin Delivery Reductions
(curtailment amounts in million acre-feet [MAF] per year)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>October 1 Triggera</th>
<th>Lower Basin Reductions</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&gt; 90%</td>
<td>0 MAF</td>
<td>No reductions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>90% - 70%</td>
<td>0 - 1.5 MAF</td>
<td>Reductions increase linearly up to 1.5 MAF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70% - 20%</td>
<td>1.5 MAF</td>
<td>Static reductions of 1.5 MAF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20% - 0%</td>
<td>&gt; 1.5 MAF</td>
<td>Static reductions of 1.5 MAF, plus additional reductions increasing linearly up to 2.4 MAF</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** Letter from Colorado River Upper Division State Representatives of Colorado, New Mexico, Utah, and Wyoming to the Honorable Camille Touton, Commissioner, U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, March 5, 2024.

**Notes:**

a. October 1 Trigger is calculated using the formula outlined in the Upper Basin Proposal.

For example, using October 1, 2023, Lake Mead and Lake Powell storage levels,\(^{138}\) CRS calculates that the proposed formula would result in a trigger of 26.5%, or static Lower Basin reductions of 1.5 million AF (as noted in Table 4):

\[
\frac{(10.658 \text{ MAF} + 8.790 \text{ MAF}) - 8.700 \text{ MAF}}{(26.120 \text{ MAF} + 23.108 \text{ MAF}) - 8.700 \text{ MAF}} \times 100 = 26.5\%
\]

The Upper Basin Alternative also proposes a schedule for Lake Powell releases based on the October 1 elevation at the lake (Table 5).\(^{139}\) This is conceptually similar to the current baseline approach, but specific release amounts would be different under the Upper Basin’s proposal and under certain conditions would be based on a linear rule curve that would reduce releases as elevations fall.

Table 5. 2024 Upper Basin Alternative: Lake Powell Operations
(release amounts in million acre-feet [MAF] per year)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lake Powell October 1 Elevation (ft)</th>
<th>Lake Powell Percentage Full</th>
<th>Lake Powell Water Year Release</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&gt; 3,700</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>As required by dam safety regulations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3,670 - 3,700</td>
<td>81% - 100%</td>
<td>Linear rule curve: 8.1 - 9.0 MAF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3,510 - 3,670</td>
<td>20% - 81%</td>
<td>Linear rule curve: 6.0 - 8.1 MAF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt; 3,510</td>
<td>&lt; 20%</td>
<td>6.0 MAF</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** Letter from Colorado River Upper Division State Representatives of Colorado, New Mexico, Utah, and Wyoming to the Honorable Camille Touton, Commissioner, U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, March 5, 2024.

The Upper Basin alternative did not provide details on exact releases that would be expected to result at all Lake Powell elevations under the proposed linear rule curve. Lake Powell’s most recent October 1 elevation (3,573 feet in 2023) would put it in the 3,510-3,670 foot range of the Upper Basin Alternative. Based on extrapolation of figures in the Upper Basin Alternative, CRS calculated that the 2023 October 1 Lake Powell elevation of 3,573 feet would result in releases of

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\(^{139}\) Upper Basin Alternative, pp 2-3.
6.83 million AF in 2024, which would be approximately 650,000 AF less than current scheduled 2024 releases of 7.48 million AF.\(^{140}\)

**Lower Basin Alternative**

The Lower Basin states of Arizona, California, and Nevada submitted their long-term operational alternative to Reclamation on March 6, 2024.\(^{141}\) It proposes changes to the current paradigm for Colorado River Basin management and includes a shift away from the near-term operational regime’s reliance on 24-month study forecasts and specific trigger elevations in Lakes Powell and Lake Mead to dictate operations.\(^{142}\) In lieu of the current system, the proposal envisions management that relies on percentage-based “total system contents” in seven Colorado River Basin reservoirs as of August 1 of each year. Four of these reservoirs (Flaming Gorge, Blue Mesa, Navajo, Powell) are located in the Upper Basin, and three (Mead, Mojave, and Havasu) are located in the Lower Basin.

The proposal envisions five “zones,” with specific water delivery reduction levels for Lower Basin states, Upper Basin states, and Mexico,\(^{143}\) associated with four of these zones (Figure 5).\(^{144}\)

1. **No Reduction Zone.** At near-capacity levels (i.e., greater than 69% to 100% of system contents, as a percentage of capacity) no reductions would be implemented. Storage has rarely approached these levels over the past decade.

2. **Initial Reduction Zone.** At system contents of 58% to 69%, Lower Basin users in Arizona, Nevada, and Mexico would see reduced water deliveries ranging up to 1.5 million acre-feet (AF) reduction at 58% of system capacity. Reduced deliveries for the first 300,000 AF of these amounts would be shared among Arizona, Nevada, and Mexico, with Arizona responsible for 80% of reductions, Nevada responsible for 3.33% of reductions, and Mexico responsible for 16.67% of reductions. Incremental reductions above 300,000 AF and less than 1.5 million AF would be shared under a separate formula that incorporates California, with 43.33% of reductions to Arizona, 36.67% of reductions to California, 3.33% of reductions to Nevada, and 16.67% of reductions to Mexico.

3. **Static Reduction Zone.** At system contents of 38% to less than 58%, the reduction on Lower Basin states and Mexico would be a flat 1.5 million AF, distributed in the amount of 760,000 AF (50.67%) to Arizona, 440,000 AF (29.33%) to California, 50,000 AF (3.33%) to Nevada, and 250,000 AF (16.67%) to Mexico.\(^{145}\)

4. **Basin-Wide Reduction Zone.** At system contents of 23% to less than 38%, water delivery reductions would range from 1.5 million AF at 38% to 3.9 million AF at 23%, with all reductions in excess of 1.5 million AF (which would

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\(^{140}\) Based on the Upper Basin Alternative, CRS calculated a linear release reduction of 13,125 AF per foot of reduced Lake Powell elevation within this operational tear.

\(^{141}\) Referred to as the Lower Basin Alternative. The Lower Basin Alternative notes that it includes assumptions regarding participation by Mexico but recognizes that this participation is determined in a separate process. See Lower Basin Alternative, p. 2.

\(^{142}\) Lower Basin Alternative, p. 2.

\(^{143}\) The proposal acknowledges that proposed totals for Mexico are subject to international negotiations and have not been finalized.

\(^{144}\) Lower Basin Alternative, attachment pp 1-4.

\(^{145}\) While there are no reductions to Upper Division states in this zone, a small portion of Arizona is in the Upper Basin and, as a result, Arizona receives some waters from the Upper Basin allocation.
continue to be shared as per the Static Reduction Zone) shared equally between Lower Division States and Mexico, and Upper Division States.

5. **Basin-Wide Maximum Reduction Zone.** At critically low levels (i.e., system contents of less than 23%), total delivery reductions would continue at the Basin-Wide Reduction Zone’s lowest level of 3.9 million AF. Thus, the maximum total delivery reduction on Lower Division States and Mexico in this zone (i.e., the above reductions scheduled for 23% of system contents) would be approximately 2.7 million AF (the initial 1.5 million AF, plus half of the remaining 2.4 million AF), while the maximum reduction for Upper Division States would be 1.2 million AF (the other half of the needed 2.4 million AF).

**Figure 5. 2024 Lower Basin Alternative: System Storage Reduction Zones**

(curtailment amounts in million acre-feet [MAF] per year)

![Figure 5. 2024 Lower Basin Alternative: System Storage Reduction Zones](image)

**Source:** Letter from Colorado River Basin States Representatives of Arizona, California, and Nevada to the Honorable Camille Touton, Commissioner, U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, March 6, 2024.

**Notes:** Percentages reference percentage of total system capacity in use for seven mainstream Colorado River reservoirs: Flaming Gorge, Blue Mesa, Navajo, Powell, Mead, Mojave, and Havasu.

For the most recent year (August 1, 2023), total basin storage percentage of capacity (i.e., the comparable live metric for the Lower Basin alternative) under the proposed metric was 44%; the comparable statistic for the same date in 2022 was 33%.146 (2023 storage was among the lowest

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levels on record.) As of early March 2024, system storage under this statistic stood at 42%. Applied hypothetically, the August 2023 figure would trigger operations within the proposed Static Reduction Zone.

Similar to its proposed triggers for Lower Basin curtailments, the Lower Basin Alternative would revise Lake Powell releases to tie them to total system capacity, with most releases (i.e., 30%-80% of system capacity) assumed to occur within a “hydrologic shortage” band that ties releases to a three-year moving average for Upper Basin depletions (Table 6). Generally within this schedule, as Upper Basin use and/or water availability decreases, required releases from Lake Powell decrease.

Table 6. 2024 Lower Basin Alternative: Lake Powell Operations
(release amounts in million acre-feet [MAF] per year)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total System Capacity</th>
<th>Lake Powell Water Year Release</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt; 80%</td>
<td>Equalization Release: Balance the contents of Lakes Powell and Mead as closely as practicable with releases between 8.5 MAF and 11.0 MAF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30% - 80%</td>
<td>Hydrologic Shortage-Based Release: Releases vary in a stepwise fashion between 7.0 MAF and 8.5 MAF depending on the extent of Upper Basin hydrologic shortage:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3-Year Avg Upper Basin Depletions Release</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&lt; 3.8 MAF 7.0 MAF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.81 - 4.3 MAF 7.5 MAF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.31 - 4.8 MAF 8.0 MAF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&gt; 4.8 MAF 8.5 MAF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20% - 30%</td>
<td>Reduced Release Ramp: Releases of 6.0 MAF to 7.0 MAF determined as a linear function.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt; 20%</td>
<td>Static Release: Releases of 6.0 MAF</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: CRS, based on letter from Colorado River Upper Division State Representatives of Colorado, New Mexico, Utah, and Wyoming to the Honorable Camille Touton, Commissioner, U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, March 5, 2024.

Notes: Percentages reference percent of total system capacity in use for seven mainstream Colorado River reservoirs: Flaming Gorge, Blue Mesa, Navajo, Powell, Mead, Mojave, and Havasu.

As noted above, October 1, 2023, system contents under the comparable statistic were 43%, which would trigger releases in the “hydrologic shortage” range of 7.0 MAF to 8.5 MAF. From 2018 to 2020 (the three most current years available) average Upper Basin consumptive use was 4.2 million AF, which if applied to the 2023 system content figure would trigger Lake Powell releases of 7.5 million AF.149

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148 Lower Basin Alternative, attachment pp. 4-7.
Issues for Congress

Funding and Oversight of Existing Facilities and Programs

The principal role of Congress as it relates to storage facilities on the Colorado River is funding and oversight of facility operations, construction, and programs to protect and restore listed species (e.g., Glen Canyon Dam Adaptive Management Program and the Upper Colorado River Endangered Fish Program). In the Upper Basin, Colorado River facilities include the 17 active participating units in the Colorado River Storage Projects, as well as the Navajo-Gallup Water Supply Project. In the Lower Basin, major facilities include the Salt River Project and Theodore Roosevelt Dam, Hoover Dam and All-American Canal, Yuma and Gila Projects, Parker-Davis Project, Central Arizona Project, and Robert B. Griffith Project (now Southern Nevada Water System).

Congressional appropriations in support of Colorado River projects and programs typically account for a portion of overall project budgets. For example, in FY2020, approximately 40% of Lower Colorado River Region’s overall budget was funded with discretionary appropriations, with the remainder of funding coming from power revenues (which are made available without further appropriation) and nonfederal partners.\(^{150}\) Congress has also authorized and appropriated funding for the Colorado River Basin in general (e.g., the Pilot System Conservation Plan).

Congress has also addressed Colorado River funding outside of the regular appropriations process. In the 117th Congress, in Section 50233 of the IRA Congress provided $4.0 billion for projects that mitigate drought in the 17 arid and semiarid reclamation states in the West,\(^{151}\) with priority given to Colorado River Basin activities. This funding is available through FY2026 and may be used for a variety of activities, including some of the previously authorized activities discussed above and as compensation for new delivery reductions. Reclamation announced initial plans for this funding on October 12, 2022, in the form of a new program, the Lower Colorado River Basin System Conservation and Efficiency Program.\(^{152}\)

The program has three components:

- Under the first component (1a), Colorado River water delivery contractors or entitlement holders submitted proposals resulting in water remaining in Lake Mead at a set price of $330 per acre-foot for a one-year agreement, $365 per acre-foot for a two-year agreement, and $400 per acre-foot for a three-year agreement. These proposals were due in November 2022.

- For the second component (1b), Reclamation accepted proposals for additional water conservation and efficiency projects that could involve a variety of pricing options as proposed by Colorado River water delivery contractors or entitlement holders. These proposals were due in November 2022.

- For the third component (2), Reclamation accepted proposals for long-term system efficiency improvements that will result in multi-year system conservation. These proposals were due in August 2023.


\(^{151}\) *Reclamation states* refers to the 17 states designated by Congress to be in the Reclamation service area, pursuant to the Reclamation Act of 1902, as amended. 34 Stat. 259.

To date, Reclamation has announced a number of water savings agreements using the IRA funds (in particular under components 1a and 1b), but the full magnitude of water savings that will result from these voluntary agreements remains unclear. If the agreements are successful, additional federal funding similar to that provided in the IRA may be requested in the future to mitigate the effect of long-term drought in the basin and reduce consumptive use from recent levels.

In addition to the aforementioned new program being implemented with IRA funding, the Administration also announced that $250 million of the act’s funding would go toward Salton Sea restoration activities over the 2022-2026 timeframe. Restoration of the Sea is a priority of the Imperial Irrigation District, one of the largest water rights holders on the Colorado River.

### Tribal Water Rights Settlements and Leasing

Many tribal water rights are senior to other water rights in the basin, and thus are likely to play an important role in the future of the Colorado River. The extent to which tribes develop their water rights, or are willing and able to market their water to other users, has ramifications for water availability in the basin. The 117th Congress authorized a new Indian water rights settlement related to one tribe’s rights to Colorado River water (the Hualapai Settlement) and enacted a new authority for the Colorado River Indian Tribes, one of the largest water rights holders on the river, to enter into agreements to lease a portion of the tribes’ Colorado River water (the Colorado River Indian Tribes Water Resiliency Act of 2022).

As previously noted, Congress has approved Indian water rights settlements associated with more than 2.5 MAF of tribal diversion rights on the Colorado River (these rights are a subset of the water allocations per state in which they are located); a portion of this water has been developed to date. Congress may be asked to fund new or upgraded infrastructure to develop existing tribal water rights, as well as to consider new settlements that would add to the existing tribal diversions. Some potential Colorado River water rights settlements, such as the settlement of the water rights claims of the Navajo Nation and the Hopi Tribe for the waters of the Little Colorado River and the Colorado River in the state of Arizona, have not been enacted.

### New Facilities and Other Alterations

Some states may pursue further development of their unused Colorado River water (i.e., rather than cutting their use). For example, one project that would develop Upper Basin waters, the proposed Lake Powell Pipeline (LPP), would direct approximately 86,000 AF of Utah’s Upper

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153 As of March 2024, the Administration reported use of $670.2 million in Inflation Reduction Act funds on 24 conservation agreements across California and Arizona; these agreements were expected to conserve up to 1.58 MAF of water through 2026. Department of the Interior, “Biden-Harris Administration Announces Major Milestone to Protect Short-Term Stability of Colorado River Basin,” press release, March 5, 2024, https://www.doi.gov/pressreleases/biden-harris-administration-announces-major-milestone-protect-short-term-stability.


155 For more on Salton Sea restoration, see CRS In Focus IF11104, *Salton Sea Management and Restoration Efforts*, by Pervaze A. Sheikh and Charles V. Stern. For more on Imperial Irrigation District’s position on the Salton Sea, see https://www.iid.com/water/salton-sea.

156 Prior to the legislation’s enactment, these tribes, who were awarded their water rights under the Arizona v. California decree, were not able to lease their water. This is not the case for most other tribes with Colorado River water rights.

157 This legislation was introduced, but not enacted, in the 112th Congress in H.R. 4067 and S. 2103.
Basin Colorado River Basin annual apportionment from Lake Powell to Washington County, UT (i.e., the St. George, UT, area, which is technically located within the Lower Basin drainage area). The pipeline would begin near Glen Canyon Dam in Arizona and would run through Arizona and Utah to Sand Hollow Reservoir near St. George, UT. Reclamation is the lead agency for the project under NEPA and is coordinating an environmental impact statement (EIS) for the most recently proposed version of the project.

The debate over the Lake Powell Pipeline is illustrative of the issues future water development proposals may face in the basin. Supporters argue that the pipeline is needed to provide a secondary water source for the St. George area (in addition to its primary water source from the Virgin River). However, environmental groups have argued that the proposed development and diversion of additional Upper Basin waters is ill-advised in light of climate change and the basin’s over-allocation. The six other Colorado River Basin states have raised concerns related to the proposed LPP’s “legal and operational issues,” and have criticized the use of the LPP NEPA process as a de facto forum for resolving a conflict among basin states. The six states previously requested that Reclamation refrain from issuing a final EIS until these issues can be resolved on a consensus basis.

Some groups that oppose new infrastructure development on the Colorado River also have proposed demolition of existing infrastructure, in particular Glen Canyon Dam. They argue that removing the dam would be beneficial to listed species and the Grand Canyon’s ecosystem and would be a cheaper and less politically problematic option than other options (e.g., fallowing Upper Basin farms to conserve water). Water and power users and most governmental entities oppose these efforts for their potential negative economic impact. Reclamation reports that it is accelerating maintenance actions at Glen Canyon Dam to determine the reliability of using river bypass tubes at the dam to enable Lower Basin releases at storage levels below minimum power pool. Reclamation is also studying the efficacy of physical modifications to Glen Canyon Dam to allow for releases below critical elevations. Removing or significantly altering Glen Canyon Dam would likely require authorization by Congress.

**Concluding Observations**

There is wide acknowledgement that existing directives for managing Colorado River Basin waters are inadequate to address the ongoing persistent drought and water uses and do not account for the basin’s current and projected hydrology. The original basis for the Colorado River Compact assumed more water than turned out to be available for consumptive uses, and drought in the basin has exacerbated this issue. Although recent agreements have reduced usage, basin-

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158 While St. George, UT, is technically within the Lower Colorado River Basin’s drainage, Utah’s state allocation comes out of waters available to the Upper Basin. Thus, the LPP would utilize Upper Basin waters.

159 For project NEPA documents and studies, see https://www.usbr.gov/uc/DocLibrary/EnvironmentalImpactStatements/LakePowellPipeline/index.html#intro.


164 Ibid.
wide consumptive use (including evaporation) has continued to exceed natural flows in most years. The resulting drawdown of basin storage has threatened both hydropower production and water deliveries. Long-term flow projections estimate that available supplies will continue to decrease, whereas new demands and diversions (e.g., development of tribal water rights) suggest that competition for this water among users will continue to increase.

Despite agreement that some level of water delivery reductions will be necessary to protect power generation and reservoir storage, there remain considerable differences of opinion as to what form these actions should take. The question of which entities to subject to water delivery reductions and of what magnitude, as well as what sort of mitigation might accompany these efforts, take on an added level of urgency due to the river’s economic importance to many areas. The relative importance of established water rights priorities in the basin, compared to priority for health, safety, and other uses, is a central issue currently facing decisionmakers. Other questions—including how much funding, if any, federal and state governments should provide users to forgo water deliveries—are also likely to figure prominently into future discussions. Changes to infrastructure and alterations to basin accounting are other likely items for debate in future basin negotiations.

**Author Information**

Charles V. Stern  
Specialist in Natural Resources Policy

Kristen Hite  
Legislative Attorney

Pervaze A. Sheikh  
Specialist in Natural Resources Policy

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