

The latest key takeaways on the evolving Colorado River situation

The news about the Colorado River, Lake Powell, and Lake Mead is escalating. While it may seem overwhelming and confusing, we want to try to explain what it all means to us here in the Phoenix Valley.

Last week, a briefing was held with the Director of the Arizona Department of Water Resources, the General Manager of the Central Arizona Project, and the Deputy Chief of the Boulder Canyon Operations for the US Bureau of Reclamation. They described a very serious situation on the Colorado River that indicates that we will have less Colorado River in the future. These are the key takeaways.



Conditions on the Colorado River

Due to historic drought, climate change, and over-allocation, [conditions on the Colorado River](#) are worsening. Despite seeing almost average winter snowpack levels this year, projections for the inflow into [Lake Powell](#) may be closer to 50% of normal. This would compound negatively upon last year's 32% of normal inflow, the second-worst unregulated inflow into Lake Powell on record. This is due to the warming temperatures, drier soils, and reduced precipitation caused by climate change. That means Powell is only at 24% capacity with nature replenishing less than the amount of water supposed to be released downriver to Lake Mead. What is happening at Lake Powell will then trigger declines in Lake Mead, leaving Arizona, California, and Nevada with less Colorado River water for the foreseeable future.

The Colorado River is currently in a mandatory reduction known as a [Tier 1 shortage](#). For Arizona, the mandatory reduction under the Tier 1 shortage and participation in the 500+ Plan means Arizona's total Colorado River water use has been reduced by one-fourth in 2022. There is still some uncertainty about whether we'll remain in Tier 1 or go into a deeper shortage in 2023. The US Bureau of Reclamation's August 24-month study will answer that. Regardless, we recognize that we will have less Colorado River water in the future, and our ten desert cities continue to plan accordingly.

What's being done

Actions are being taken to address the situation at the federal, state, and local levels, and there is a lot to unpack.

First, the US Bureau of Reclamation oversees the management of the river. Reclamation has worked with the seven Colorado River Basin states to address a magnitude of changing conditions over the last two decades. Since 2014, Arizona, California, and Nevada have proactively participated in system conservation. Additionally, participation in the Drought Contingency Plan (DCP), the 500+ Plan, and other [system conservation](#) efforts have contributed to keeping Lake Mead's water levels 70 feet higher than if no actions were taken and saved us from entering a Tier 3 shortage.

Yet, the current situation is worsening at a rapid rate, which requires immediate action to address the dropping water level at Lake Powell. The overall Colorado River system is no longer generating 15 million acre-feet but closer to 11 million acre-feet or less, which means tough discussions need to occur among Reclamation and with the Basin States, including Arizona.

At the state level, Arizona is engaging with others in the basin to look at additional voluntary actions to use less Colorado River water and avoid mandatory shortage reductions or a unilateral decision from the Federal Government. State leaders are also considering how to invest \$1 billion in projects this year that could generate more water and overall resiliency. It is critical to ensure that money is spent as wisely as possible and recognize that \$1 billion is only a start when it comes to funding major water augmentation projects.

Recent efforts to support the Colorado River by the AMWUA cities have included contributing to the plan to [mitigate DCP for central Arizona agriculture](#), assisting with water and money to the [500+ Plan](#), and paying higher rates to cover CAP's operation and maintenance costs even though less Colorado River water is being delivered through the CAP system.

For decades, the ten AMWUA cities have methodically, proactively, and carefully planned and invested in their water supplies. Now, as the situation on the Colorado River continues to worsen quicker than expected, the cities continue to invest in water supply resiliency projects, including new infrastructure projects, enhancing water loss control programs, reducing water use at their own facilities, and expanding customer outreach and conservation programs. It is also important to remember that each Valley city has different portfolios of water supplies, and none of them rely 100% on Colorado River water.

What's next

The current reality is that nature is in control of the Colorado River conditions. Regardless, it is understood that there will be less Colorado River water in the future. Therefore, water managers of the river must find additional voluntary efforts to somehow slow the decline of Lake Mead and ultimately decide how to reduce the overall consumptive use of each state.

At the State level, more discussion will occur about what additional system conservation actions Arizona can take to reduce the uncertainty and actually protect the river. The state will continue collaborating with water users and providers to develop solutions that show Arizona is a leader.

The ten AMWUA cities remain committed to wise water management and efficient water use to ensure sustainable growth and a thriving economy here in the desert. They will also continue [strategically planning and proactively investing](#) in their diverse water portfolios, infrastructure, technology, and conservation programs.

While there is no imminent threat to water at the tap inside your home and business, as residents, we need to recognize that with less Colorado River water in the future, small water-wise changes in lifestyle can positively impact our community's water future. Water [conservation and efficiency](#) are vital to a sustainable future here in the desert, and we all play a part.

For over 50 years, the Arizona Municipal Water Users Association has helped protect our member cities' ability to provide assured, safe, and sustainable water supplies to their communities. For more information, visit www.amwua.org.