

Reclamation pressures Basin States to find collaborative solutions to protect the Colorado River

Water users across the Colorado River basin have been anxiously anticipating the release of a draft document outlining proposed steps to stabilize and protect the Colorado River system by the US Bureau of Reclamation. The document, known as the Supplemental Environmental Impact States (SEIS), is now public, leaving many wondering if Reclamation finally provided some clarity on what reductions water providers will face in 2024.



The answer is not a simple yes or no. The 476-page document did lay out two action alternatives, focusing on contributions from the Lower Basin States – Arizona, California, and Nevada. However, it was noted during last week’s press conference that the intent of creating the two bookend alternatives was to ultimately push the Colorado River Basin states to find a compromise and agree somewhere in between the two proposed alternatives – all before May 30th, when the 45-day public comment window is set to close.

While both action alternatives will protect the reservoirs’ levels and the overall system, the difference between them is which users will bear the brunt of the cuts. It basically comes down to low-priority cities or high-priority farmers along with River. Fortunately, officials from the Lower Basin states have not stopped engaging in conversations and remain committed to finding common ground through a collaborative agreement, ultimately hoping to avoid litigation. While details of those discussions won’t be available until a plan is officially submitted to Reclamation by the stated deadline, the reality remains the same – Arizona will have significantly less Colorado River water moving forward.

The main goal of completing a SEIS is to modify operating guidelines by this summer so Reclamation can use it to determine action for 2024, the decision water providers have been waiting for since last June when Reclamation stated that drastic action was necessary to protect the system and ensure it would not hit dead pool. As water professionals comb through the details of the draft SEIS, there is no clarity on what reductions Reclamation will require next year.

So while much uncertainty remains, one thing that was made clear is that federal officials will prioritize protecting the reservoir levels at both Lake Powell and Lake Mead to avoid the system from crashing and that taking no action is not an option. Additionally, they stated that the Basin States need to use science and creativity to find new solutions to a long-standing problem in a unified manner, which is not a simple process with easy solutions.

During the press conference, there were also many statements and questions on whether this winter's snowfall will impact any actions or reduce the need for reductions. The common answer was that while the precipitation during the winter months has been encouraging, it will not save the Colorado River and does not lighten the pressure on the Basin States to collaborate on an agreement for reductions. If significant runoff does come from this winter's snowfall, we may have some reprieve in 2024 from extreme Colorado River reductions, but significant actions will still be needed to protect the long-term viability of the River. And if there is a slight reprieve next year, that time needs to be used to continue to transition and prepare for Colorado River reductions that will still come our way, especially not knowing how extreme those cuts will be.

After the public comment period closes at the end of May, federal officials stated that they will make a record of decision before the release of the August 24-month study when the Lake Mead and Lake Powell operations are confirmed for 2024. That is when the ten AMWUA cities and other water providers should finally get some long-anticipated answers so they can plan more precisely for what's coming. Whatever course of action Reclamation takes, we must be realistic that the final decision will be difficult for all water users and sectors as we face the stark reality of a River that is producing less water.

Regardless, the ten AMWUA cities are preparing for the worst-case scenario and every scenario in between by looking at infrastructure needs, ramping up conservation programs, and exploring water resiliency projects. They also remain committed to being part of the solution by engaging in Colorado River discussions and advocating for their residents to ensure their desert communities remain resilient for generations.

Additional background

The SEIS process was initiated in October 2022. The release of the draft follows months of intensive discussions and collaborative work with the Basin states and water commissioners, the 30 Basin Tribes, water managers, farmers and irrigators, municipalities, and other stakeholders. The draft alternatives in the SEIS incorporate concepts from many models and proposals received during the scoping period, including from all seven Basin states.

The alternatives presented in the draft SEIS analyze measures that may be taken under Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland's authorities to protect system operations in the face of unprecedented hydrologic conditions while providing equitable water allocations to Lower Basin communities that rely on the Colorado River System.

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