

Mother Nature helps to negotiate Colorado River Deal

Last week, Arizona, California, and Nevada announced a proposal to reduce their use of Colorado River water through 2026. This plan requires modest water reductions of 3 million acre-feet over the next three years that the federal government would largely compensate. The favorable winter snowpack in the Colorado River Basin and its projected runoff made this proposal possible by providing a reprieve from the dire projections that Lake Powell and Lake Mead could rapidly fall to deal pool within a few years.



So what does all this mean? Especially since we have been hearing about the dire situation of the Colorado River for months. Is the problem now solved? Are we out of the woods? Or did we simply catch a break?

While we are extremely fortunate that water levels in both Lake Mead and Lake Powell will rise due to this year's significant snowpack, the reality remains that the Colorado River is still overallocated and will continue to produce less water. The Lower Basin plan will help to temporarily stabilize both Mead and Powell, which allows all seven Basin States and Reclamation to shift their focus from short-term fixes to how to manage the River for the long term, which is required to happen by 2026.

Mother Nature made reaching this deal easier for Arizona, California, and Nevada by providing an unexpected 151% above-average water flow into Lake Powell, the second-highest projected runoff since the historic drought began in 2000. The Lower Basin plan complements this higher-than-anticipated runoff by aiming to conserve an additional 3 million acre-feet of water in Lake Mead among the three states through the end of 2026; half will be conserved by the end of 2024.

In April, the federal government proposed two alternatives for reducing the water demand in the Lower Basin for 2024; both were seen as problematic among the users of the River and could have led to unwelcome and obstructive litigation. That added extra motivation to the negotiations and additional pressure on the Lower Basin States to develop their own proposal.

The three states have incorporated into their plan some of the \$4 billion from the Inflation Reduction Act and other federal funds targeted to incentivize the protection of the Colorado River. Therefore, most of the 3 million acre-feet reduction comes from compensating users for system conservation – voluntarily leaving water in Lake Mead to protect its levels. Five AMWUA

municipalities – Phoenix, Glendale, Peoria, Scottsdale, and Gilbert – have committed to being part of this solution by agreeing to leave a portion of their Colorado River water in Lake Mead.

The Lower Basin proposal also includes provisions to take extra action if the projected hydrology quickly worsens before 2026. This includes further reducing releases from Lake Powell if projections show elevation levels would fall below 3,500 feet in the next 12 months. This would protect Glen Canyon Dam's ability to release water and generate power. Additionally, if Lake Mead is projected to fall below 1,025 feet by the end of the year, the Lower Basin States must take action to prevent elevation levels from sliding down to 1,000 feet, which is only slightly above dead pool.

So what are the positives of the Lower Basin proposal? It takes advantage of the favorable hydrology and federal incentives to generate system conservation, which will increase Lake Mead elevations. Both the plan and Mother Nature's contribution should prevent Lake Powell and Lake Mead from reaching critical operational levels – where water cannot pass through their respective dams – before 2026. This now provides some time for Reclamation and the Seven Basin States to grapple with how to effectively manage an overallocated river that will continue to produce less water for long past 2026.

And what challenges remain despite the Lower Basin proposal? The various band-aid efforts to protect the River until 2026 have reinforced historic and new points of contention among water users in the Colorado River Basin. Those must be dealt with to successfully develop the Post-2026 Operating Guidelines. While there is a general acknowledgment that the River is producing less water, all users from all sectors in all seven basin states must still determine how to collectively reduce demands.

We recognize that Mother Nature gave us a gift this year. Since 2000, the Colorado River Basin has been afflicted by the worst drought in 1,200 years and experiencing its climate shift to being hotter and drier so that it produces less water. We must use this given time to finally make the tough decisions and take action so all 40 million people who rely on the River can continue to benefit from the River.

The ten AMWUA cities know they are in the midst of a paradigm shift as one of their major water supplies will be significantly reduced. For decades they have invested in Colorado River water as a key part of their portfolios and invested in the infrastructure to ensure its use for the long term. Yet, until the 2026 reconsultation is complete, municipal water providers will have to deal with the uncertainty of how much less Colorado River water they should expect, which is a planning challenge. However, despite the uncertainty, the AMWUA cities will continue to strategize and invest as needed so they can respond to any challenges that may arise and can continue to meet the water needs of their communities, just as they always do.

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.