

Cities are doing their part to protect the Colorado River

The Colorado River is in better condition than it was this time last year when water elevations at Lake Powell and Lake Mead were at critically low levels. While Mother Nature and this past wet winter provided enough water for the River's dams to remain operational, commitments for increased system conservation by entities across the Lower Basin, including here in Arizona, are playing a vital role in stabilizing the system.



Last week, the US Bureau of Reclamation confirmed that the immediate possibility of the system's reservoirs falling to extremely low elevations that would threaten water deliveries and power production has been staved off. This means that Lake Powell and Lake Mead will not come close to critical operational levels before the end of 2026. While we already know that we will go from a Tier 2 Shortage to a [Tier 1 Shortage in 2024](#), the Tier 1 Shortage is also projected to continue into 2025. This is a positive after anticipating we could be in a Tier 3 Shortage when things looked much worse last year.

Additionally, Reclamation announced it plans to accept a proposal put forth by the Lower Basin States in May for managing the River through 2026, when new operating guidelines are to go into effect. The [Lower Basin States proposal](#) was a collaborative effort among Arizona, California, and Nevada that led many water users to leave water in Lake Mead through system conservation agreements that were implemented this summer.

This is all relatively good news, at least for now. Yet, it has not come without work and commitment to the greater good. Since 2019, Arizona entities, including AMWUA cities, have been doing their part to stabilize the declining Colorado River system. In a [statement](#) released by the [Arizona Department of Water Resources](#) in response to Reclamation's announcement last week, it was noted that by the end of 2023, Arizona has conserved more than 3.7 million acre-feet of water in Lake Mead since 2014 through voluntary contributions and mandated reductions under shortage. Some of the most significant contributions from Arizona include the following:

DCP (2019): The AMWUA cities committed substantial resources in support of Arizona's [Implementation Plan for the Drought Contingency Plan](#). This included agreeing to send 100,000 acre-feet of water to Pinal County farms to help mitigate DCP impacts to Pinal agriculture. Cities also understood that the cost of Colorado River water they received from the Central Arizona Project would increase under DCP. Those same rates would help fund \$60 million worth of mitigation support for Arizona's Implementation Plan. Under DCP, the AMWUA cities agreed to take reductions in deliveries under water contracts, resulting in a significant expense for each of them.

500 Plus Plan (2021): The [500+ Plan](#) was another significant effort to prevent Lake Mead from falling to critically low levels, which is why several entities, including tribal and non-tribal water users in Arizona, came forward to voluntarily contribute water on top of the reductions already agreed upon in the Drought Contingency Plan (DCP) and in a Tier 1 shortage. All parties worked diligently to rapidly pull together this effort within only four months.

MOU (2022): Many public water providers in the Colorado River Basin affirmed their commitments to implement progressive water conservation programs, initiatives, policies, and actions within their respective communities by signing a [Memorandum of Understanding \(MOU\)](#), including many of the AMWUA cities.

Additional System Conservation (2023): The Lower Basin States' plan that has been agreed to by Reclamation is built around the collaborative commitment of water users in the Lower Basin to conserve water that will total three million acre-feet in Lake Mead over the next three years. This winter's good hydrology provided the flexibility for water users to pledge their water to this program. Arizona partners who committed to taking part in these reductions include tribes, agriculture, industry, and cities, including many of the AMWUA municipalities.

In addition to the announced projections, Reclamation released its scoping for the process to devise a long-term plan for the Colorado River system post-2026. Reclamation provided a broad and flexible scoping, which is positive and allows for various options to be considered for developing the post-2026 operating guidelines.

While all of this can be viewed positively, it is critical to understand that the Colorado River challenges are far from over. Lake Mead is only at 34% capacity. Conditions in the Colorado River Basin are being dramatically impacted by drought and a hotter and drier climate. For a better sense of what the Colorado River is battling, here is a stark fact – even with the great winter, there has been a loss of one million acre-feet in the total runoff from what had been originally projected in April. This emphasizes the reality that the Colorado River is producing less water. The 40 million people and nearly 5.5 million acres of agricultural lands, along with hydroelectric renewable power, recreational opportunities, and habitat for ecological resources, must come to terms with how to effectively manage and rely on a smaller Colorado River.

Planning for the long term will continue at the federal level and among the Basin States. Locally, the ten AMWUA cities know they are in the midst of a paradigm shift as one of their major water supplies will continue to be 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 well into the future. Now, knowing there will be less Colorado River water in the future, they will continue to strategize and invest as needed so they 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.