Federal officials warn of impending water crisis in the American Southwest

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The Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee held a hearing last week on the state of the severe drought affecting the American Southwest. Bureau of Reclamation Commissioner Camille Calimlim Touton informed the committee that severe cuts to water allocations would be necessary to ensure that water supplies did not deplete beyond "critical levels."

"A warmer, drier West is what we are seeing today," she said. "And the challenges we are seeing today are unlike anything we have seen in our history."

Seven states with rights to the Colorado River will have to reduce withdrawals by two to four million acre-feet of water next year, according to Touton. One acre-foot is equal to one acre of land flooded with one foot of water. This would be a significant reduction to the 15 million acre-feet of water that is allocated from the river to California, Arizona, Nevada, New Mexico, Utah, Colorado, and Wyoming.

The cuts are in response to a rapidly developing water crisis in the Southwest. Nearly 40 million people rely on water from the Colorado River and thousands of farms depend on that water to cultivate some of the most productive agricultural land in the country.

For over a century, the states along the Colorado grew rapidly as major irrigation projects brought seemingly endless supplies of water into arid landscapes. But now the Southwest is two decades into its worst drought in the last 1,200 years.

Researchers have been able to determine this using tree-ring data stretching back hundreds of years, which indicates that the region has gone through several "mega-droughts" that can last from a couple decades to a couple centuries.

The current drought has seen the water levels in lakes Mead and Powell, the two largest reservoirs in the United States, decline to their lowest levels since they were first filled, with both lakes at just 28 percent of full capacity. Lake Mead in particular is currently in a death spiral, with the water level declining by over 22 feet since just the beginning of March.

These conditions are expected to only worsen over the next few years. The Bureau of Reclamation, the federal agency tasked with managing these reservoirs, released updated projections for future water levels earlier this month. The Bureau is now predicting that the water elevation in Lake Mead will fall to about 1,015 feet by September 2023, just 120 feet above the "dead pool" level of 895 feet. Should the lake fall below 895 feet, water will no longer be able to pass through the dam, stopping flow downstream to 25 million people.

Lake Powell is also expected to fall to a level where hydropower generation is no longer possible, cutting off a critical electricity supply for millions of people. To prevent this, the Bureau of Reclamation announced it would hold 480,000 acre-feet of water in Lake Powell and release 500,000 acre-feet to it from smaller reservoirs up river.

As the water level in Lake Mead continues to decline, there are a series of elevation thresholds for the imposition of cuts to water deliveries. For the first time ever, the Bureau of Reclamation was forced to declare a Tier 1 water shortage in August of 2021, resulting in Arizona taking over 500,000 acre-feet in water cuts, largely to agricultural producers in central Arizona. The cuts, imposed under the 2019 Drought Contingency Plan, have caused many farmers to watch their crops die and to let fields go fallow in an effort to conserve water.

At the current pace of decline in Lake Mead, even more stringent cuts are expected to take place. Below an elevation of 1,045 feet, additional cuts are supposed

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to take effect, with cuts to Arizona increasing to 640,000 acre-feet, Nevada increasing to 27,000 acre-feet, and California taking its first cut of 200,000 acre-feet. Mexico is also included in the agreement and is committed to taking a cut of 76,000 acre-feet at this elevation.

Lake Mead dropped below 1,045 feet on June 15, two levels of cuts past the first shortage declaration. However, the Bureau of Reclamation has not imposed the Tier 2 (1,050ft) or Tier 2b (1,045ft) level cuts.

This is the result of the Bureau's capitulation to the demands of state governments to avoid the inevitable. When the Bureau decided to hold 480,000 acre-feet in Lake Powell, it also agreed, at the request of state planners, to pretend that the water was actually in Lake Mead. This meant that Lake Powell could continue to produce electricity and the lower basin states could avoid taking additional cuts to their allocations.

But since that agreement was made, the real supply of water in Lake Mead has passed through two levels of shortages without any action.

The most the Bureau of Reclamation has done so far has been to call on state governments to develop a plan of action themselves, giving the Colorado basin states two months to agree to a conservation plan, threatening to take federal action only if they should fail to do so, regardless of the quality of that agreement. Despite numerous comments from experts and officials on the severity of the situation at the Senate hearing, no real significant plans or proposals were made. The hearing amounted to little more than a declaration that things are bad and that someone ought to do something about it.

The effectiveness of handing the issue over to the states is questionable. The states in the Colorado basin have a history of engaging in bitter disputes over water rights, with Arizona in particular having a long history of conflict over water, especially with California.

When the Colorado River Compact was signed in 1922, the Arizona state legislature refused to ratify the agreement until 1944. And in 1934, Arizona Governor Benjamin Moeur sent the National Guard to halt the completion of Parker Dam on the California-Arizona border, delaying construction for months.

The severity of the situation requires an extensive and coordinated effort to reduce water consumption, improve efficiency, and increase conservation. Many states and cities have taken some action independently. Las Vegas has become the leader in this regard. Despite growing by 800,000 people since 2002, the city's conservation efforts have reduced total water use by 27 percent.

But cities and states cannot avoid catastrophe on their own. After 22 years of severe drought, the refusal of the ruling class to take any serious action to mitigate the crisis is beyond negligent. Over a century of policies designed to maximize profit are finally reaching a point of reckoning.

Upwards 80 percent of water consumption in the Southwest comes from agriculture, much of which is directed to farms growing high water-demand crops like alfalfa, cotton, almonds, and rice.

For large and wealthy farms the benefits in changing methods are not worthwhile. While for smaller farms the cost of upgrading irrigation equipment or buying new machinery for different crops is simply too much. Many small farmers in the Southwest have preferred to sell their land to solar energy developers instead of taking on large debts to fund that transition.

Meanwhile, property developers and local governments have promoted rapid suburban development in arid environments, often with little concern or planning for the future. Consequently, Arizona's largest industry is the real estate, rental, and finance sector.

The capitalist mantra of unbounded profit is coming to terms with reality. Unless water resources, and consequently all mechanisms of economic and political management, are placed under the rational control of the working class, the capitalist class will continue to drive the region into ruin and environmental catastrophe.

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