

US government announces new water cuts in Southwest as states fail to reach agreement

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17 August 2022

The US Bureau of Reclamation announced a second series of water cuts in the Southwest this week after state governments failed to reach an agreement on how to reduce water use. The seven states in the Colorado River basin were given until mid-August by the Bureau to develop a plan to conserve an ever dwindling water supply before the federal government intervened.

The Colorado River, which provides water to 40 million people and millions of acres of farmland, is suffering through a 22-year-long drought, the worst in 1,200 years. Faced with an impending collapse of water supplies along the Colorado, Bureau officials announced this summer that states would need to reduce water use by 2–4 million acre-feet of water in the coming years, roughly 15 to 30 percent of the total amount used today. One acre-foot is enough to supply two families of four people for an entire year.

This call for drastic cuts was prompted by the rapid decline in the water levels in Lakes Powell and Mead along the Colorado River, the two largest reservoirs in the United States. Both reservoirs have fallen below 30 percent capacity and continue to decline at an alarming rate. Last year the water level of Lake Mead fell below 1,075 feet above sea level, initiating the Tier 1 round of water cuts.

In this year's forecast, the Bureau expects the water level in Lake Mead to fall below 1,050 feet and has indicated that it will impose the next round of cuts associated with this level. Arizona's cuts will rise from 512,000 acre-feet to 592,000, Nevada's will rise from 21,000 to 25,000 and Mexico's share of the cuts will rise from 80,000 to 104,000. California, the single largest user of Colorado River water, will continue to take zero cuts to its allocation.

The Bureau's decision to finally take action is long overdue and far from adequate. Water experts have

called the Bureau's call for 2–4 million acre-feet in conservation necessary, and have urged the Bureau to utilize its federal authority to do more. Yet the agency has continued to insist that the states should decide on how to manage the crisis themselves and has refused to take necessary action to develop basin-wide programs to mitigate the drought.

Kyle Roerink, executive director of the Great Basin Water Network, called the limited cuts “utterly deficient” and “untenable.”

Meanwhile, the Western states continue to bicker over who should take the cuts to their allocations. Manager of the Central Arizona Project, Ted Cooke, complained that “It is unacceptable for Arizona to continue to carry a disproportionate burden of reductions for the benefit of others who have not contributed,” aiming his comments at California and the states in the upper Colorado basin.

Andy Mueller, director of the Colorado River District, issued his own complaint that lower basin states were not doing enough themselves and that California and Arizona would have to take more cuts before they took any action. “Until they do that, they should expect no additional help,” he said.

Muller's statement echoed a “plan” that upper basin states issued in response to the Bureau's call for action. The two-page document included just four vague bullet points with zero commitments to reduce use.

With state action nowhere in sight, the federal government has had to take action. In the Bureau's August 24-Month projection for water levels on the Colorado it predicts that the level in Lake Mead will fall to 1,042 feet in January 2023. This value should initiate a Tier 2b shortage. However, the Bureau is counting 480,000 acre-feet of water held in Lake Powell to protect hydropower production as existing in

Lake Mead, artificially inflating Mead's water level.

Such an accounting forgery is a desperate attempt to avoid taking further action and is a thinly veiled effort to appease the political and economic interests of California, which will avoid necessary water restrictions for another year.

Not only is this cheap water-shuffle trick enabling overuse, but the Bureau's entire process for determining shortages is counterproductive. Lake Mead's water level has been below 1,045 feet since mid-June, but the Bureau will only make shortage determinations based on the projected water level in January 2023, which the Bureau has conveniently determined to be 1,042 feet without the fake water, and 1,047 with it.

Following January 2023 the Bureau expects the water level in Mead to decline rapidly. In its "most probable" projection, the Bureau expects the water level to fall below 1,025 feet by June 2023, which is the threshold for the largest amount of cuts agreed to by the Lower Basin states. Arizona, Nevada and California would have to cut a combined 1.1 million acre-feet of use under this level.

In the Bureau's "minimum probable" projection, the water level in Mead could fall below 1,000 feet by July of 2024, less than 100 feet from "dead pool," the point where water can no longer pass through the dam to produce power or supply users downstream. This level would be roughly half of the reservoir's current volume.

The severity of the water crisis in the Southwest is reaching an inflection point. Without necessary cuts to consumption, the Colorado River will be sucked dry. Yet at the same time, water cuts are leaving farmers without water to grow crops. Hundreds of thousands of acres of farmland in Arizona have dried up, and farmers in California have already left nearly 700,000 acres of farmland fallow before losing a single drop of Colorado River water. Without proper basin-wide planning the entire region is tobogganing towards disaster.

Central to the crisis is the anarchy of the capitalist system and its inability to manage public resources. The last 100 years have seen state governments in the Southwest scramble to swallow up as much water as possible, unconcerned about the long term implications of overexploiting a limited resource.

John Entsminger, general manager of the Southern

Nevada Water Authority, blamed "drought profiteering" in a letter to federal officials. In his letter he derided state negotiations that "produced exactly nothing in terms of meaningful collective action to help forestall the looming crisis," noting the "unreasonable expectations" of stakeholders who all wanted to get the most and give up the least.

Christopher Kuzdas, a senior water program manager with the Environmental Defense Fund, added that "Over the last 20 years, there's been several years where there were opportunities to not take all the water from the system, but we still did... With one more dry winter, there may not be enough water in storage to stave off a major water system failure for Arizona and the Southwest."

Some progress has been made in previous decades. Overall water use per person has been declining and Las Vegas is able to recycle nearly all of the water that it takes from Lake Mead. But demand continues to exceed supply and major economic interests continue to exert disproportionate influence in decisionmaking, especially from an agricultural sector that uses around 80 percent of the West's water.

Even the much touted Inflation Reduction Act, signed by Biden this Wednesday, will do little to combat the effects of climate change, including severe drought. The bill includes only limited tax credits and funding for renewable energy and has allocated just \$4 billion for water-related conservation. That \$4 billion is slated for distribution to states, tribes and local agencies to fund voluntary conservation efforts. Spread across the over 50 million acres of irrigated farmland in the US alone, this paltry sum comes out to less than \$100 per acre.



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