

Bureau of Reclamation floats federal cuts to Colorado River water use as extreme drought continues

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Following months of bitter debates and failed negotiations between states on the Colorado River over how to reduce water consumption, the United States Bureau of Reclamation (BOR) has released its draft Supplementary Environmental Impact Survey (SEIS). The SEIS is the basis upon which the BOR will make any federal determinations on how to impose cuts to water use should the states in the Colorado River basin fail to reach an agreement among themselves.

So far such a mutual agreement does not appear likely. The BOR issued an ultimatum last summer, saying that basin states had to reach an agreement by the end of summer or the federal agency would force one on them. That deadline came and went and further months passed with no action taken to solve the crisis on the Colorado River.

The most severe drought in 1,200 years, worsened by the impacts of human-caused climate change, has been hitting the Southwest for the past 20 years, leaving Lake Mead, the water source for tens of millions of people and millions of acres of farmland, one-quarter full. Projections from the BOR indicate that if no action is taken to stop the decline in Lake Mead, and the overall water supply in the Colorado River, then there may not be enough water to meet demand in the next few years.

Testifying before Congress last year, the Assistant Secretary for Water and Science at the Department of the Interior, Tanya Trujillo, said that between two and four million acre-feet of water needed to be saved to prevent the Colorado River and Lake Mead from falling into acute shortage, roughly one-quarter to one-third of current use (an acre-foot is enough water to supply two households for one year). Water consumption has

outstripped annual supply for years and without drastic cuts to demand Lake Mead may reach “dead pool,” the condition where the water level is so low that it can no longer move through the dam to supply downstream users.

A deal to avoid such a catastrophe was almost reached earlier this year, with six of the seven river-using states agreeing to an outlined plan to reduce collective use by around two million acre-feet. But California officials rejected the deal, arguing that the state’s priority in the water rights seniority system granted it rights to its full allocation of water and that it would not take cuts to its use to conserve water for junior users.

An important element of this is that not only are local users in California higher in the priority system, which allows senior water users to keep using water when there is a shortage at the expense of junior water rights holders, but the entire state of California has seniority over all of Arizona.

In 1968, Arizona and California reached a deal to provide federal funding for the Central Arizona Project, which pumps Colorado River water to the center of Arizona to provide water to the Phoenix area, where roughly five million people now live. In exchange for support in Congress from California, Arizona agreed that it would recognize its use as junior to California’s. In other words, Arizona water users must give up their use to California in the event that there is not enough water to supply both.

This is the legal justification on which California bases its opposition to water conservation, arguing that it has full legal right to its share and that all other states must sacrifice to fill its needs, largely serving the

interests of wealthy farm owners in the Imperial Valley, the single largest user of Colorado River water and the fourth largest agricultural producer in the country.

Responding to these claims, the BOR has modeled three options for action: a No Action plan in which no new water cuts are made, Action Alternative 1, which adds additional cuts based on seniority, and Action Alternative 2, which imposes equally proportional cuts based on 2021 water use.

Under Action Alternative 1 California would take no new cuts to its use at all next year. Instead, Arizona would take the brunt of the drought, reaching up to 1.7 million acre-feet in cuts depending on the elevation in Lake Mead in 2024. Should the level of water in Lake Mead fail to stabilize and remain in critical condition in 2025, California and Arizona would share around 1.4 million in cuts each at max shortage conditions. Either way, Arizona takes the majority of cuts despite having a lower apportionment. Arizona is allocated 2.8 million acre-feet while California is allocated 4.4 million.

Under Action Alternative 2 California would take more cuts based on its proportion of use. In 2024 it would take a max of about 1 million acre-feet. Arizona would take on less new cuts at just 367,000, but would still suffer slightly more in total because it promised to take on certain cuts under the 2019 Drought Contingency Plan (DCP). In 2025 total cuts would max around 1.8 million for Arizona and 2 million for California.

The SEIS also investigated the economic impact of the varying plans, finding that Alternatives 1 and 2 could cause hundreds of millions of dollars in economic losses from water shortages, forcing farmers to fallow farmland and agricultural workers being put out of work. The outlook is bleak, with both plans causing extensive loss of farmland and jobs, and water shortages in cities.

However, what is missing from the report is a projection of the long-term effects of not taking any action. While the SEIS is dedicated to short-term planning up to 2026, the long-term effects of taking no action could be even more devastating for all users. Lake Mead currently has just over seven million acre-feet of water left, about one year's supply for the lower basin. While recent heavy snow has lifted hopes for a slight respite from the drought, current trends suggest the entire Colorado River system could collapse by the

end of the decade unless major action is taken.

The plans affect Arizona and California differently but the overall effect is expected to be the same. The goal is to save a certain amount of water, about two million in 2024 and four million in 2025 under the worst circumstances. Water levels in Lake Mead are projected to reach similar levels regardless of which plan is implemented.

The BOR has not issued a preference for one plan over another. That decision will be made when the final assessment is published later this year. For now, the SEIS is more a warning to the Lower Basin States (California, Arizona, Nevada) about what it could do if a mutual agreement is not reached.

A 1963 Supreme Court ruling in *Arizona v. California* found that the BOR has the authority to determine water allocations on the Colorado River; it merely needs to exercise its authority over the states. Despite this, the BOR has been reluctant to take decisive action, claiming it needed to complete its environmental surveys and that it was afraid of lawsuits against the Bureau by water users and states.

Reckless indecision and petty bickering has been a feature of water management on the Colorado River for a century, ever since the Colorado River Compact was first signed in 1922.

The capitalist ruling class has pushed to exploit the water resources of the Colorado to a breaking point, never once stopping to consider the consequences of its actions. Now the millions of people that rely on the water and food grown in the Colorado Basin stand on the edge of a catastrophe because of policies designed to maximize profit. Management of the world's natural resources cannot be left in the hands of a class that ignores imminent disaster. Preventing collapse on the Colorado River requires the expropriation of the capitalist class and the placement of water management under scientific, socialist planning, in which the world's resources are used to satisfy human need, not private profit.



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