

Lower Colorado River basin states reach agreement to conserve minimal water, avoid federal cuts

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The three states in the Lower Colorado River basin, Arizona, California, and Nevada, have reached an agreement to reduce water use in the drought-stricken Southwest. After nearly a year of tense negotiations between the states and with the federal government, the states have agreed to temporary reductions in use, ahead of major negotiations scheduled for 2026.

In total the lower basin is allocated 7.5 million acre-feet of water by the Colorado River Compact, the 100-year-old agreement between the states on the Colorado River that divides water between them. California is the largest user of Colorado River water, with an allocation of 4.4 million acre-feet. Arizona is awarded 2.8 million and Nevada 300,000 acre-feet. An acre-foot is enough water to flood one acre of land one foot deep, or about enough to supply two households for a year.

The proposed agreement, which will be reviewed by the Bureau of Reclamation and ultimately approved or rejected by the federal government, would seek to save three million acre-feet from this year to the end of 2026. These savings would be implemented using voluntary conservation efforts by irrigation districts and cities paid for using \$1.2 billion of money allocated for water projects in the Inflation Reduction Act passed last year. Of the three million acre-feet, 2.3 million would come from reduced usage on farms and in cities funded by federal money, with the other 700,000 open for further negotiation between the states.

These proposed cuts come just days before a May 30 deadline from the Bureau of Reclamation to reach an agreement by consensus before potential federal action was taken. The Bureau's proposals would have sought to conserve between two and four million acre-feet.

With the new agreement the Bureau of Reclamation rescinded its proposals and will instead review the basin

state proposition before its final approval. This comes despite warnings from researchers in the Bureau of Reclamation that Lakes Mead and Powell, the two largest reservoirs in the country, could reach critically low levels in the coming years, and that two to four million acre-feet of water will need to be conserved every year to maintain balance between a dwindling supply and growing demand.

The proposed agreement would reduce demand by about 13 percent, compared to the 25-33 percent that the Bureau has said is necessary.

State and government officials have lauded the plan as a “breakthrough” and “landmark” deal.

Camille Calimlim Touton, the Bureau of Reclamation commissioner, declared, “This is an important step forward toward our shared goal of forging a sustainable path for the basin that millions of people call home.”

“I am very happy with this proposal,” said Tom Buschatzke, director of Arizona’s Department of Water Resources and the state’s lead negotiator in the talks. “I think there is a lot of equity in it.”

Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland said that the deal was a testament to the Biden administration’s “commitment to working with states, Tribes and communities throughout the West to find consensus solutions in the face of climate change and sustained drought.”

Mostly, however, the deal is a stopgap to keep water levels in the system just above collapse until the renegotiation of the Colorado River Compact begins in 2026. States have already begun hashing out how to redivide the ever-smaller supply of Colorado water but they will have three years before the legal system, known as the “law of river,” is up for total re-haul.

With better than usual snow pack in the mountains this

year and Lake Mead expected to rebound slightly, state water managers feel more inclined to agree to relatively small cuts to get them through the next three years, before the consequences of continued delay catch up with them.

Buschatzke added that, “The good winter helped us in a way that we could take advantage of that good hydrology, but we’re not relying upon that good hydrology. We started to see that we could protect the system, we could build elevation in the system, and that we didn’t have to have an outcome in which anybody needed to have additional costs imposed against them.”

The perspective of water conservation being a “cost” imposed upon water users is pervasive among water managers in the American West. Coming into line with the multi-million acre-foot imbalance between supply and demand, in other words reality, is seen as an unfair punishment for the urban developers, farmers and ranchers that overindulged in water they did not have to spend.

The political motivation behind this blind march into ecological collapse is the insatiable need of the capitalist system to continuously produce the greatest profit possible, regardless of the consequences.

Cities in the Colorado River basin house 40 million people, all of whom need water to live. But the regional planning of the Southwest has been dominated by irrational development schemes based on rapid expansion of the housing stock and the financial interests of banks trading mortgage securities. In Arizona the fastest-growing industries are not agriculture, mining or manufacturing, they are construction and finance. Development is outstripping the ability of the Colorado River to support the population, despite advancements in water reuse and conservation technologies.

Ultimately, however, it is not the population growth along the Colorado that is causing the crisis. Nearly 80 percent of all water in the basin is used by agriculture. The majority of this water is dedicated to alfalfa, a fast-growing forage crop that uses vast amounts of water to feed cattle and dairy cows. Alfalfa is an incredibly water-thirsty crop that can require up to 48 inches of water a year to grow.

Powerful economic interests benefit from the current system of over-allocating the Colorado River. As long as production continues there is little concern about the fact that there may not be enough water in the coming years. This is particularly true in California, where the Imperial Irrigation District is the largest single user of Colorado River water.

The belligerent attitude of California’s water managers defeated a proposed deal agreed to by the other six basin states earlier this year that would have saved around two million acre-feet in total. California rejected the deal, arguing that it did not have to take any cuts because of its seniority in inter-state water law.

Water rights in the West are based on priority, essentially a first-come-first-serve system. If there is not enough water to satisfy all water users then junior rights holders must surrender their water to senior water users. Much of California’s water rights are more senior than anywhere else on the river, giving it great influence over conservation negotiations. By law, the entire state of Arizona could be drained of all its water before California would need to make any significant reductions in its use.

Such petty bickering between states over private water rights and the profit system stymie any coordinated efforts to conserve water and have created a powder keg waiting to explode. While water managers continue to kick the can down the road, hoping to avoid angering their local water users at the expense of others, the Colorado River continues to decline in annual flows. Even with snow pack at 150 percent of average, the long-term trends of water supply in the basin show dangerous signs of a looming catastrophe unless much-needed action is urgently taken.

The preservation of the Colorado River and the continued water supply for 40 million people and five million acres of farmland requires comprehensive and coordinated planning and efforts to make scientifically sound decisions about water management. The private water rights system and the drive to accumulate private profit are incompatible with this.

The Colorado River must be brought back from the edge of collapse through socialist planning, bringing the resources of the region into sustainable management for social need, not private profit. Only by abolishing capitalism and its irrational system of water and land management can the Colorado River crisis be averted, along with countless other environmental and social catastrophes around the world wrought by capitalist-induced climate change.



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