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Is the DCP designed to avert a declaration of shortage?

By

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The State's water stakeholders have been engaged for more than two months to craft Arizona's approach to the Lower Basin Drought Contingency Plan. This effort, led by our two agencies, is directed toward "bending the curve" to protect Lake Mead from falling to critical levels.

Recent reports from the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation have stated that the Colorado River Basin has avoided shortage for 2019, but has at least a 50/50 chance of moving into a shortage declaration in 2020.

So, will this drought contingency planning effort change that course? Will it keep the basin out of the Tier 1 shortage to be declared at Lake Mead elevation 1075'?

The answer to both questions is, simply, "no."

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The Lower Basin Drought Contingency Plan, or LBDCP, is not designed to keep Lake Mead above the first tier of shortage. Rather, it's meant to keep Lake Mead from further dropping to the most critical elevation levels, at which point Arizona's Colorado River water users would be facing deep cuts to their water supplies and the river system would be in extreme stress.

The risks to the Colorado River have increased from what was expected when the Interim Guidelines for Lower Basin Shortage were established in 2007. The tools provided in those guidelines now are insufficient to address the current risks to the system.

Over the last several years, water users in the Lower Basin states have worked together to voluntarily contribute water to Lake Mead, staving off shortage since 2015. However, after nearly two decades of drought and the recent poor hydrology (meaning little snow in the Upper Basin), a Tier 1 shortage is imminent, even with these increased conservation efforts. Whether it's in 2020 or a year or two after, that first level of shortage likely will occur, regardless of LBDCP.



If not to keep us from shortage, then why is the Lower Basin's DCP important?

One of the most important components lies in the realm of collaboration.

By working together, Arizona, California, Nevada, the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation and now Mexico (through the recent treaty update known as Minute 323), we can chart a path forward so one state alone does not feel the brunt of shortage. Once LBDCP is in place, we can work in partnership to leave enough water in Lake Mead so the lake begins to recede at a slower level – the “bending of the curve,” which has been rapidly trending downward. It will take some time to get there, but by starting now, there will be more leverage and momentum to prevent the lake from falling to critically low levels.



To make this happen sooner, rather than later, we have formed a Steering Committee

with representation from a variety of sectors within Arizona. This group has been meeting

bi-weekly beginning in late July and likely will continue past Thanksgiving. This “AZDCP” effort includes four essential elements

for implementing the LBDCP in Arizona, which the group has begun to work through. The goal is to have a plan in place before the end of the year that would incorporate broad-based agreement within Arizona supporting an effective LBDCP. The State Legislature would then consider the proposal in early 2019 to authorize the State of Arizona to sign the LBDCP.

Each public Steering Committee meeting we've held has essentially been standing-room only. It's clear a lot of people believe negotiating an effective Lower Basin Drought Contingency Plan is vital to our State. And each meeting tends to spawn additional meetings with people throughout Arizona working feverishly to get this done – not to keep us out of shortage, but to keep us and the Colorado River system from being in an even worse place.

Much work has been done and much will continue to be done – but the sooner we have the drought-contingency plan in place, the greater the benefits we will all reap via a plan that is acceptable to all Arizona water users.

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Prev

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