



Colorado River Shortage FAQs

WHAT IS CAUSING THE SHORTAGE ON THE COLORADO RIVER?

The Colorado River Basin has been in a prolonged drought, exacerbated by climate change. We are experiencing the driest conditions in the basin in more than 1,200 years – and these conditions are expected to continue well into the future. The resulting reduced river flows are further stressing the over-allocated Colorado River.

The U.S. Secretary of the Interior bases a shortage declaration on the elevation of Lake Mead, which is dependent upon releases from Lake Powell. In fact, both Lake Powell and Lake Mead are approaching critical elevations and will require unprecedented management actions to protect infrastructure in both the Upper (Colorado, New Mexico, Utah and Wyoming) and Lower (Arizona, California, Nevada and parts of Mexico) Colorado River Basins.



WHAT DOES A SHORTAGE ON THE COLORADO RIVER MEAN FOR ARIZONA?

A shortage means a reduction in the supply available to Lower Colorado River water users. Per the 2007 Interim Guidelines and the 2019 Drought Contingency Plan (DCP), Arizona was in a Tier Zero shortage for 2020 and 2021; a Tier 1 shortage in 2022; and a Tier 2a shortage for 2023. A Tier 2a shortage represents a 592,000 acre-foot reduction to Arizona's Colorado River supply, constituting 34% of Central Arizona Project's normal supply in an average year, 21% of Arizona's Colorado River supply and about 9% of Arizona's total water use.

As the impacts of drought persist, there will be additional reductions, almost certainly beyond the currently defined shortage levels. Since CAP has a junior priority in the Lower Colorado River Basin and shares a junior priority within Arizona, those reductions are likely to significantly impact CAP water users.

WHY ARE ADDITIONAL REDUCTIONS NECESSARY – ABOVE WHAT'S ALREADY BEING CONSERVED AS PART OF THE 2007 GUIDELINES AND DCP REDUCTIONS?

The impacts of drought and the effects of climate change have resulted in unprecedented conditions on the Colorado River. For nearly a quarter century, the annual runoff in the Colorado River Basin for the majority of years has been below average. This has resulted in depleted storage conditions in both Lake Powell and Lake Mead. The effects of soil aridification are adding to this problem because the Basin is not receiving as much runoff even in years with average snowpack.

Bureau of Reclamation Commissioner Camille Touton testified before the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources in June 2022, acknowledging that these challenges are unlike anything we've seen in our history. Touton stated that in addition to the actions already prescribed under the 2007 Interim Guidelines and the Drought Contingency Plan, an additional 2 to 4 million acre-feet (MAF) of conservation is needed in 2023 (and through the end of the 2007 Interim Guidelines period, which is 2026) just to protect the critical levels in the major reservoirs, allowing for power generation and infrastructure stability.

WHERE WILL THIS WATER COME FROM?

Arizona is working with the other Basin states to investigate ways the additional reductions can be shared. In 2022, Arizona reduced Colorado River water use by approximately 800,000 acre-feet – more than a quarter of its annual apportionment. Additional reductions in Arizona alone will not be sufficient to address this unprecedented challenge.

WHY ISN'T MANDATORY CONSERVATION BEING REQUIRED FOR ARIZONA RESIDENTS?

Each Arizona water provider has a unique “water portfolio,” meaning their water comes from various sources, including the Colorado River. Each community water system is also required to develop a drought plan, which may include public education, use of alternative water supplies, voluntary conservation, conservation incentives and mandatory restrictions. Cities and towns – especially those heavily reliant on Colorado River water – have been activating their respective drought plans. These plans require varying levels of conservation at the municipal and residential level.

Mandatory conservation is already in place for many of Arizona’s municipal and industrial water users. This includes low water-use plants and landscaping, plumbing codes, restrictions on artificial/decorative lakes and turf restrictions. Cities have been maximizing the use of their treated wastewater for decades by putting the vast majority to beneficial use – creating riparian habitats, irrigating sports fields/golf courses, providing water for power plants and recharging aquifers by storing reused water underground.



WILL ARIZONA HAVE ENOUGH WATER FOR THE CURRENT POPULATION?

Yes. Since the early 1980s, Arizona has mandated conservation and water-use reporting in the state’s most populated areas. With its requirement of a 100-year water supply for all new development and water conservation mandates for municipal, industrial and agricultural water users, Arizona’s 1980 Groundwater Management Act is known as one of the most robust water management laws in the United States.

Many cities also have diverse water supplies, which include in-state surface water, reclaimed water and groundwater. They have been planning for drought and shortage for decades, including storing trillions of gallons of water underground to be used in the future.



WILL ARIZONA'S GROWTH BE IMPACTED BY THIS SITUATION?

Shortage will impact a lot of things, in Arizona and elsewhere. Central and southern Arizona cities have been complying with Arizona’s Groundwater Management Act laws, which require a 100-year assured water supply for any new development within certain designated areas. Each water provider has its own unique water portfolio or combination of water supplies. The assured water supply program takes into account the potential for shortage and available alternative supplies in evaluating water supplies for new development.

With an eye toward helping secure Arizona’s water future, Arizona’s Governor and Legislature earlier this year invested \$1.2 billion over three years to fund projects that in time will bring additional water to the state, as well as more water conservation efforts.

WHAT ELSE CAN ARIZONANS DO TO CONSERVE?

While a lot has been done, there is always an opportunity for more. Residents can learn more about how to save water from their local water provider; there are also many water-saving tips at [WaterUseItWisely.com](https://www.wateruseitwisely.com).

WHERE CAN I FIND MORE INFORMATION ABOUT THE SHORTAGE?

The Arizona Department of Water Resources and Central Arizona Project both have shortage information on their websites. In addition, residents can subscribe to ADWR’s blog ([azwaternews.com](https://www.azwaternews.com)) and to CAP’s Know Your Water News ([knowyourwaternews.com](https://www.knowyourwaternews.com)) to receive the latest updates.