

Preparing for Colorado River shortage: **Milestones**

The Lower Colorado River Basin has been in a shortage status since 2020 (Tier 0 for 2020 and 2021; Tier 1 in 2022; and Tier 2a shortage in 2023). To understand how we got to the point of shortage and what this means, it's helpful to review some of the 21st Century's Law of the River milestones.

Western water lore includes frequent references to the Law of the River. This refers not just to one law, but a compendium of sorts that includes compacts, treaties, federal laws, court decisions, a decree, contracts, agreements and regulatory guidelines. The Law of the River has evolved continuously over the past century, building upon itself, often providing solutions to rising issues. Each new building block is intertwined with all the former blocks, making the body of the Law of the River quite complex.

As it relates to shortage, the most relevant milestones begin with the 2007 Interim Guidelines. Here's a look at how the Colorado River has been operated since then:



2007 INTERIM GUIDELINES

FEB. 28, 2007

- Established a shortage framework for the Lower Basin
- Incentivized storage of water in Lake Mead (called Intentionally Created Surplus or ICS)
- Coordinated operations of Lake Powell and Lake Mead
- Expires in 2026



MINUTE 323

SEPT. 26, 2017

- Binational agreement that expanded collaboration and sharing of shortage risks and surplus opportunities between Mexico and the United States
- Established the Binational Water Scarcity Contingency Plan
- Provided for U.S investment in water infrastructure and environmental projects in Mexico
- Established a work group to investigate binational desalination in the Sea of Cortez
- Effective through 2026, consistent with the 2007 Interim Guidelines

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DROUGHT CONTINGENCY PLAN AUTHORIZATION ACT

APRIL 16, 2019

Lower Basin highlights:

- Supplements the 2007 Interim Guidelines
- Created a "Tier Zero" at Lake Mead, requiring contributions to Lake Mead earlier, starting at elevation 1090', and increased contributions at lower elevations
- California agreed to make contributions to Lake Mead starting at elevation 1045'
- Provided for the protection of Lake Mead elevation 1020', which led to the 500+ Plan

Upper Basin highlights:

- Designed to minimize the risk of Lake Powell falling below elevation 3525'
- Established foundation for the storage of water in the Upper Basin as part of a demand management program that may be developed in the future



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One of the upcoming milestones in the Law of the River will be the new guidelines that will take place in 2026 when the 2007 Interim Guidelines expire. The Colorado River Basin states will play a leading role in developing these new guidelines. The Arizona Department of Water Resources and Central Arizona Project have convened the Arizona Reconsultation Committee to provide input on Arizona's participation and path forward in this process.

To stay up to date on shortage issues, visit KnowYourWaterNews.com and click on "River Updates."

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