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## **ARIZONA, CALIFORNIA, NEVADA PROPOSE NEW APPROACH FOR POST-2026 COLORADO RIVER OPERATIONS**

***~ Alternative addresses the impacts of drought and climate change through a holistic and sustainable approach to the coordinated operations of Lake Powell and Lake Mead that improves predictability for water users ~***

Phoenix, Ariz (March 6, 2024,) – The Lower Basin States in the Colorado River Basin today jointly submitted to the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation (Reclamation) a proposed alternative for long-term Colorado River operations that would help ensure the river system’s health and sustainability for decades to come.

The alternative, drafted collaboratively by Arizona, California and Nevada, is designed to provide for sustainable management of the system under a very broad range of future conditions that have been exacerbated by drought and climate change. It reflects a new and more holistic approach to Colorado River management, in which required reductions are based on the health of seven major system reservoirs.

Arizona Department of Water Resources Director Tom Buschatzke, Colorado River Commissioner for California JB Hamby, and Southern Nevada Water Authority (SNWA) General Manager John Entsminger jointly submitted the alternative to Reclamation as part of the federal agency’s process to develop new post-2026 operating guidelines for the river.

“The Lower Basin Alternative submitted today to Reclamation represents a serious commitment to the health of the Colorado River. The magnitude of these reductions is both difficult and necessary,” said ADWR Director Buschatzke, Arizona’s designated representative on Colorado River issues. “This is our commitment to working with our river partners to protect the Colorado River from Wyoming to Mexico.”

The alternative creates a path toward greater long-term stability in a river system wracked in recent decades by the effects of drought, climate change, and over-allocation, which have required additional proactive efforts such as the 2019 Drought Contingency Plans and more dramatic efforts in 2022-2023 to protect the system from reaching critically low elevations.

Importantly, as part of the alternative, users at and downstream of Lake Mead would reduce uses of Colorado River water by 1.5 million acre-feet each year under a broad range of conditions to address the structural deficit and future aridification caused by climate change. The structural deficit causes Lake Mead to decline annually, even under normal releases from Lake Powell upstream. Water lost to evaporation and river seepage in the Lower Basin contributes to this annual decline. A recent Reclamation report estimates these losses total about 1.3 million acre-feet annually within the Lower Basin.

“While addressing the structural deficit in the Lower Basin is a critical step in stabilizing the Colorado River, developing durable, long-lasting solutions requires all water users to manage demands and commit to water conservation,” said SNWA General Manager John Entsminger, Nevada’s representative on the Colorado River. “Providing a framework that would better align future water demands with available supplies, the Lower Basin Alternative provides greater protections for the river and more certainty for its users.”

If system conditions deteriorate further, all water users would collectively participate in the solution. Under the Lower Basin Alternative, those additional reductions, beyond the initial 1.5 million acre-feet that would be solely assigned to the Lower Basin and Mexico, would be shared between the Upper and Lower basins and Mexico – up to a total of 3.9 million acre-feet of reductions.

“The Lower Basin Alternative creates resiliency and proposes climate change is a shared responsibility of all those that depend on the Colorado River,” said Colorado River Commissioner JB Hamby. “We need new ways of thinking to solve problems that have been unresolved for nearly a century and solutions for future challenges like climate change and extended drought — that’s what the Lower Basin Alternative does. Each basin, state, and sector must contribute to solving the challenges ahead. No one who benefits from the river can opt out of saving it.”

The alternative links Colorado River use to storage volumes contained within multiple Upper and Lower Basin reservoirs, ensuring that current and future water uses remain balanced with supplies. Unlike the current guidelines, which are based on Lake Mead and Lake Powell elevations, the Lower Basin states propose basing reductions on the volumes of water contained within seven Upper and Lower basin reservoirs.

This total system contents method performs better at protecting critical reservoir elevations than today’s operations, provides more certainty in addressing the effects of climate change, and largely eliminates the use of forecasts from decision-making on reduction volumes.

The alternative also proposes new release criteria for water from Lake Powell to Lake Mead. These criteria are streamlined compared to the current guidelines. Releases are based primarily upon reservoir contents in the Upper Basin. The alternative responds to hydrologic shortages in the Upper Basin by reducing releases from Lake Powell as Upper Basin use is impacted.

Many of the rules currently governing Colorado River system operations expire in 2026, including the 2007 Interim Shortage Guidelines and the 2019 Drought Contingency Plans. Last year, Reclamation initiated an environmental review process to develop new rules for post-2026 operations. Water managers across the Colorado River Basin – including federal, state, and tribal managers – have been negotiating a consensus-based alternative that could be proposed as part of that process.

Alternatives proposed to Reclamation, including the Lower Basin alternative, will be reviewed as part of the multi-year environmental review process led by Reclamation.

Meanwhile, the Lower Basin states acknowledge that the best path forward for all users of the Colorado River is one that the seven states can unanimously support. The Lower Basin states remain committed to working with the Upper Basin states, Mexico, water users, Tribes, stakeholders, and NGOs to develop a Basin-wide consensus-based alternative for further evaluation.

A copy of the Lower Basin Alternative is linked [here](#).

#### **Quotes regarding the Lower Basin Alternative**

*“Protecting the future of the Colorado River must be a collective effort. The approach that was sent to the federal government today is a tremendous step forward, but there’s more to do. We need everyone across the Colorado River Basin working together to find the solutions necessary to protect the future of the Colorado River.”* – **Brenda Burman**, General Manager, Central Arizona Project

*“The alternative proposed today goes further and thinks bigger than anything previously done to protect the Colorado River. We have developed a framework that could bring lasting sustainability to the Colorado River. But it will take participation from each and every one of us. Every water user across the Basin must commit to using less, while as a Basin we look for opportunities to augment supplies. If we all step up, we can implement a holistic plan that is inclusive of cities, farms, tribes and the environment, and leaves no one without water, ensuring we all thrive.”* – **Adel Hagekhalil**, General Manager, the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California

*“Over the last two decades, we have seen that the Colorado River is producing less water due to unprecedented warmer and drier conditions and a historic drought. Going forward, the Colorado River needs to be managed holistically as proposed by the Lower Basin States and not by one crisis after another. This common-sense alternative will provide greater predictability and long-term stability for all water users in the Colorado River Basin. The wise management of the Colorado River is important to our member municipalities in the Phoenix metropolitan area, which collectively provide water to over 3.7 million residents – more than half of Arizona’s population – and to the businesses and industries that support the regional and national economy.”* – **Warren Tenney**, Executive Director, Arizona Municipal Water Users Association

*“Palo Verde Irrigation District endorses the Lower Basin Alternative for future operation of the Colorado River. The unified Lower Basin adaptive management approach will stabilize river flows for generations and secure reliable water for agriculture. It will also benefit Mexico, the Upper Basin States, and the population of 40 million people throughout the Basin. Much work remains ahead for Reclamation, the Upper Basin, Mexico, and the Lower Basin to collaborate toward implementing this practical, realistic alternative.”* – **Bart Fisher**, President, Palo Verde Irrigation District Board of Trustees

*“As one of the fastest growing cities in the nation, having greater predictability on the water supply from the Colorado River is critical in planning for future growth, which the Lower Basin States alternative proposal provides. The alternative proposal also provides the collaborative, balanced and sustainable approach that’s needed to successfully manage the river.”*

– **Barbara Chappell**, Water Services Director, City of Goodyear, Arizona

*“CVWD supports the need to update the Colorado River operations rules in addressing the current and future impacts of changing hydrology. We believe the framework outlined in the Lower Basin Alternative provides a rational path forward for the system’s long-term health and stability. Shared responsibility among all seven states ensures reliability for all 40 million people and 5.5 million acres of farms that depend on the River. CVWD is committed to doing our part.”*

– **Jim Barrett**, General Manager, Coachella Valley Water District

*“Phoenix is dedicated to delivering safe and reliable water to its 1.7 million customers. With this objective in mind, city leaders welcome the collaboration among the Lower Basin states to develop a strategy for Colorado River operations that addresses the challenges of overallocation and climate change. This pivotal moment calls for an unprecedented level of unity, creativity, and commitment from all stakeholders across every sector as we strive to ensure the long-term viability of the river. Phoenix shares the goal of all parties: adapt, innovate, and work collectively to secure the future of the Colorado River for our communities and future generations.”* – **Cynthia S. Campbell**, Water Resources Management Advisor, City of Phoenix

*“The Imperial Irrigation District appreciates the collaborative efforts within the Lower Division States to craft an alternative for Reclamation to model as it moves forward with developing post-2026 operating guidelines. Through hard work, and a collective willingness to listen and consider each agency’s perspective, we have made significant strides forward since last year. IID is committed to continuing the conversations necessary to allow for consideration of a compromise proposal that balances water supply certainty for our community during a record-breaking drought, while still protecting the district’s longstanding legal positions and senior water rights.”* – **Jamie Asbury**, General Manager, Imperial Irrigation District

*Our Yuma agricultural community has existed for generations along the Colorado River, and we support analysis of the Lower Basin Alternative by the Bureau of Reclamation. We are pleased to see Lower Basin negotiators take the River’s challenges seriously and prepare an Alternative that recognizes the need to make reductions across the Colorado River Basin in a predictable and realistic manner.* – **Robert Woodhouse**, Board President of Wellton-Mohawk Irrigation & Drainage District

*“Since time immemorial, the Quechan people have relied on the Colorado River for our physical and spiritual sustenance, and the Tribe is deeply committed to ensuring that this living river remains healthy and capable of providing for the people and ecosystems that rely on it,” said **Quechan Tribal Council President Jordan Joaquin**. “It is why we have always fought for and will continue to defend our water. Particularly in the face of climate change and the hydrologic challenges it creates, it is essential that the post-2026 management framework for the River provides for human and ecosystem needs, protects tribal water rights, and reflects a viable strategy for preserving the River for us all. The alternative the Lower Basin States of Arizona, California, and Nevada submitted today to the Bureau of Reclamation marks an important step toward this goal, and I commend the Lower Basin States for their hard and collaborative work in reaching this point. I particularly appreciate their thoughtful plan for addressing the structural deficit and the proposal to move away from a reliance on forecasts to making management decisions based on total system contents. We look forward to our continued engagement with Reclamation, our sister tribes, the Basin states, and other key stakeholders as this process continues to ensure that we reach a sustainable outcome.”*

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