

ALERT TOP STORY TOPICAL

Feds announce short-term cut in Colorado River water for Arizona

Tony Davis

Aug 16, 2022



A sign marks the water line from 2002 near Lake Mead at the Lake Mead National Recreation Area last month. The largest U.S. reservoir record low amid a punishing drought and the demands of 40 million people in seven states on the Colorado River.

John Locher / Associated Press

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The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation announced Tuesday it will step up the level of cuts in Colorado River deliveries in 2023, due to continuing water level declines at Lake Mead.

But the bureau held off on any larger, longer-term cuts in water deliveries — which it has said are necessary — while it and the seven Colorado River Basin states continue to negotiate in future months. Reclamation Commissioner Camille Touton had told the states in June to come up with a plan by mid-August to reduce their river water use by up to 28% by 2023. It didn't happen, but Touton and others said Tuesday at a news conference that all parties will continue to negotiate toward producing a plan.

Some water officials and environmentalists criticized that lack of immediate action as “punting” and “extraordinarily discouraging.”

For next year, the bureau will reduce the amount of Central Arizona Project water it delivers by 80,000 acre-feet compared to this year’s delivery. That brings the total shortfall for the CAP to 592,000 acre-feet — more than one-third of the project’s supply of 1.5 million acre-feet before the shortages kicked in, and 21% of the state’s total Colorado River supply of 2.8 million acre-feet.

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That cut is required and was scheduled under a 2019 drought contingency plan, under which cuts in water deliveries increase gradually as Lake Mead declines. The loss of CAP water will fall largely on Phoenix-area cities and on tribes.

Tucson isn’t affected by those cuts, but has agreed to leave more than 20% of its total CAP share of 144,000 acre-feet in Lake Mead next year, as part of a separate deal. That will leave the city with less CAP water to recharge and store in basins in the Avra Valley, but won’t affect the CAP water delivered to Tucson Water customers.

Nevada and Mexico will also endure short-term cuts in river water deliveries next year, but California will not. The drought contingency plan doesn’t require California to take less water until Lake Mead drops further.

As for the longer-term cuts, the bureau on Tuesday announced the launching of several initiatives, including insuring “maximum efficient and beneficial use” of river water by cities and farms in the river’s Lower Basin of Arizona, Nevada and California.

That would most likely mean toughening the federal definition of “beneficial use,” to make it harder to prove an individual use of water from federal reservoirs meets the definition.

The bureau will also “prioritize and prepare” for other administrative measures, including one to address the loss of river water to evaporation, bureau and top Interior Department officials said Tuesday. Currently, the hundreds of thousands of acre-feet of river water that evaporate

every year in Lower Basin reservoirs aren't counted against the basin's total Colorado River supply, but some experts say evaporation should be subtracted from total supplies.

However, officials of the bureau and Interior, its parent agency, offered no specific timetables for when such initiatives will be carried out.

Overall, the bureau only listed at most four of the dozen proposals that Southern Nevada Water Authority General Manager John Entsminger urged in a letter he wrote to Interior and bureau officials on Monday.

Still, "we will work to develop with the states as many conservation agreements as possible, today, throughout the week and for the rest of the year," said Tanya Trujillo, Interior's assistant secretary for water and science. "We have a proven track record, and that is exactly what we are going to be working on."

Interior also said it would "support technical studies" to determine if authorities can modify Glen Canyon and Hoover dams so they can continue to deliver water in quantities needed to serve downstream users when they fall below "dead pool" levels, at which water normally couldn't be extracted from the reservoirs.

The agencies will accelerate studies to improve the reliability of four steel outlet tubes at Glen Canyon Dam so they can transmit water from Lake Powell downstream for extended periods if the lake falls below the level at which its water can be used to generate electricity through turbines.

Trujillo and other Interior officials didn't respond, however, to questions from reporters on whether it will ever consider decommissioning Glen Canyon Dam, an idea advocated by some environmental groups for many years but opposed by state water officials. Trujillo didn't even respond to a question as to whether the department would rule out decommissioning of the dam.

"We're focused on maintaining the integrity of the existing structure, the existing system. That's our highest priority, and what is continuing to be our focus as we talk with the basin states and basin tribes and partner with Mexico," Trujillo said. "We need to be able to insure we have the infrastructure intact to protect water supplies for everyone" who relies on them.

Interior's actions were far less sweeping and mandatory than what Touton had threatened to impose back in mid-June. Since then, the basin states' water officials met repeatedly to discuss a plan but hadn't come close to adopting one.

At Tuesday's news conference, reporter Annie Snider of Politico asked officials when they'll start work on the steps they had discussed, adding, "How long will you continue to threaten an action and have that be meaningful to the states? It seems like the states are calling your bluff here."

Touton replied that officials had started work on them, adding, "We've started to develop the tools needed to protect the system. We're continuing to work with states. We believe the solution here is one of partnership. We're continuing to work toward developing these things."

The need to cut water use has been caused by rapidly declining water levels at Lakes Mead and Powell. On Tuesday, the bureau released its latest monthly forecast for reservoir levels, and they remained bleak, although they were slightly better than the forecast issued in July.

The latest forecast predicted Lake Mead would fall to 1,039 feet by the end of 2022, 29 feet lower than it was at the end of 2021. At the end of 2023, Mead is projected to fall to 1,023 feet. That level is 2 feet below the elevation at which the most severe shortage approved under the 2019 drought plan would kick in — a shortage that would reduce Tucson's supply of CAP water by about 14%.

Lake Powell is projected to fall to 3,520 feet by the end of 2022, or 17 feet lower than where it stood at the end of 2021. The lake would have fallen much farther by the end of this year had the bureau not both reduced deliveries from Mead to Powell and increased deliveries to Powell from an upstream reservoir by significant amounts earlier this year.

Longtime Arizona water official and attorney Kathleen Ferris dismissed the bureau's actions announced Tuesday.

"Talk about punting. The bureau said nothing today. The numbers on the lakes haven't changed. They say we need to get consensus and we're just going to keep working on it.

"We're going to do some technical studies, and try to see if we can take water out of lakes below dead pool. I find that frightening. That's just basically draining the lakes dry. They didn't make any commitments. It's extraordinarily discouraging," said Ferris, a former Arizona Department of Water Resources director.

At a news conference following the one by Interior, a group of environmentalists said the department's actions showed a lack of leadership.

"There's a lot of hard truths to be faced now that go against the logic of 20th century water management, and things people were previously unwilling to talk about," said Nick Halberg of the Utah Rivers Council. "That includes having the Upper Basin (Colorado, New Mexico, Utah

and Wyoming) get serious about saving water, and having substantial serious water cuts out of the Lower Basin. ... The speed is important. We are really are on a limited timeline.”

But Jennifer Pitt of the National Audubon Society said she was heartened to see the bureau say it will develop a plan. “I expect them not to fully reveal their hand in what they’re doing,” she said.

Sharon Megdal, director of the University of Arizona’s Water Resources Research Center, noted that while the bureau had pulled back on its earlier pressure to force a 2 million to 4 million acre-foot cut, the pressure remains on the states due to the river’s worsening condition.

“The users understand that. People will still point fingers at each other, but I observe more people stepping up now with proposals. They realize the system could crash and everybody needs to work to avoid that.”

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By Tony Davis

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Tony graduated from Northwestern University and started at the Star in 1997. He has mostly covered environmental stories since 2005, focusing on water supplies, climate change, the Rosemont Mine and the endangered jaguar.
