

First CAP shortage for Colorado River declared; more cuts may be coming soon

Tony Davis Arizona Daily Star



The Central Arizona Project canal near Sandario Road and Mile Wide Road northwest of Tucson.

Mamta Popat, Arizona Daily Star

As expected, U.S. Bureau of Reclamation officials on Monday declared the Colorado River's first shortage in Central Arizona

Project deliveries for 2022 — a shortage that will have the greatest impacts on Pinal County farmers and none on cities.

But additional cuts affecting more people may be coming more quickly than anticipated until now, officials said at a news conference called to make the formal announcement of the river's first shortage declaration.

The shortage declaration by the bureau will reduce deliveries to the Central Arizona Project by roughly one-third, or 512,000 acre-feet.

Besides farmers, these cuts will also affect some Indian tribes, "excess water" deliveries to parties who normally buy water that other users don't have contracts for and recharge of CAP water into various underground storage basins. The cuts for Arizona, Nevada and Mexico together will be about 613,000 acre-feet, although California will have no cuts in 2022. An acre-foot is enough water to cover a football field one-foot deep with water.

But Arizona's water chief indicated at the news conference that to keep already ailing Lake Mead from falling too low, the three Lower Colorado River Basin states including Arizona will need to take additional water-saving actions beyond what's already planned. That additional action is legally required under the three-state drought contingency plan because the latest bureau forecast says it's possible that Mead could drop

to close to critically low levels by as soon as June 2023.

The state representatives have already started meeting to discuss possible future cuts, Tom Buschatzke, Arizona Department of Water Resources director, told the news conference without providing much more detail.

“The tools we have to achieve the goal are conserving more water in Lake Mead and reducing water use,” Buschatzke said. “This is a serious turn of events, not a crisis.

“To my partners, the basin states, the tribes, other water users and non-governmental organizations, the challenge before us ... will be daunting. But we can and will address these issues and be successful together in partnership,” said Buschatzke at the news conference, also attended by numerous Bureau of Reclamation officials and representatives of at least three of the six other river basin states.

But at a separate news conference held after the one held by officials, a group of environmentalists and the head of a huge Southern California irrigation district blasted as grossly inadequate the efforts of federal and state officials to respond to declines in Colorado River flows that have drastically lowered its reservoirs' water levels since 2000.

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They said that despite the much-touted drought plan the basin states approved in 2019, the states and feds really don't have a long-term plan to bring the river into balance between how much water people use and how much nature provides.

"This is not the time for small steps, this is a time for large ones," said J.C. Hamby, director of the Imperial Irrigation District, headquartered in El Centro, California, near Yuma. "This is a tremendous problem that requires tremendous solutions, bold solutions, to respond to the continued drawdown on Powell and Mead."

The drought contingency plan is only a plan to manage reservoir levels, not to truly adapt to long-term declines in river flows triggered by climate change and the accompanying warming weather, added Zachary Frankel, director of the Utah Rivers Council.

"There is not a climate plan for the Colorado River, just the federal government and states watching the reservoir levels drop," Frankel said.

The bureau's CAP cutback was triggered by its latest monthly forecast for its reservoir operations that predicted that Lake Mead would end 2021 at a bit below 1,066 feet. That's nearly 10 feet lower than the threshold the states and feds have

established for a shortage call: below 1,075 feet at the end of a calendar year.

These low levels have been attributed by many scientists to continued climate change, led by hotter temperatures that aggravated already dry conditions.

At the end of 2021, Lake Mead will be about 34% full, and Lake Powell at the Arizona-Utah border will be about 27% full, bureau official Dan Bunk said.

The latest bureau forecast for the end of 2022 is more dire still. The most likely lake level then will be barely above 1,050 feet, the bureau's monthly 24-month study said. If Mead drops below 1,050 feet at the end of any calendar year, additional cuts kick in, affecting some Phoenix-area cities, Indian tribes and some industrial users, although Tucson wouldn't be affected.

Arizona, Nevada and Mexico would lose a total of 613,000 acre-feet under that scenario, although California would lose no Colorado River water unless the lake drops below 1,045 feet.

But the bureau's latest forecast also predicts that under the worst case climate scenario, Lake Mead could hit 1,030 feet by June 2023. If a forecast predicts the lake will fall that low within the next two years, the drought contingency plan

requires the basin states to start meeting and find additional water use cuts to keep Mead.

The purpose of such cuts would be to keep Mead from dropping to 1,020 feet or below. The 1,020 foot level is five feet below the lowest level now planned for in the drought contingency plan, a level that would for the first time require cuts to Tucson's CAP supply of 144,000 acre-feet.

Tanya Trujillo, the Interior Department's assistant secretary of water and science, said at the press conference that these cuts come as "we are seeing the effects of climate change in the Colorado River Basin through extended drought, extreme temperatures, extensive wildfires and in some places flooding and landslides.

"We're in our 22nd year of drought. Earlier this summer our reservoirs hit their lowest levels since they were filled," Trujillo said, and the basin's reservoir system is at 40% of capacity.

"We're seeing combined effects of lower than average snowpack, hotter temperatures and drier than average soil conditions," she said.

Monday's announcement of shortages also amounts to a recognition that the hydrology that the basin states and feds planned for years ago, "that we hoped would never see, has appeared," said Camille Touton, deputy Bureau of

Reclamation Commissioner.

"I remember taking a tour, standing on top of Hoover Dam, thinking I could touch the water because the water level was so high. Little did we know then that 2000 would be the start of a 22-year drought," she said.

But the shortage announcement also demonstrates that Reclamation is fully implementing plans approved by an agreement among basin states, Touton said.

The environmentalists and Hamby, however, said the reservoirs' continued declines shows that it's folly for Upper Basin states such as Utah and Wyoming to keep pushing to build more water diversion projects such as the Lake Powell pipeline. It would take 86,000 acre-feet a year of water — almost as much as Tucson Water customers use in a given year — from the lake to fast-growing St. George, Utah.

"They're trying to put more development in the Upper Basin, when there's not enough water even making it to the lower basin," said Robin Silver of the Tucson-based Center for Biological Diversity. "Water is going to be going to growth in St. George and to growth in Phoenix, all of which is going to aggravate the predicament that we're in."

Saying the states will consult a couple more years about what to do about the river is "an insult to reality," he added.

“I’m a medical doctor. When a patient is hemorrhaging, you don’t sit around and have a discussion about do we have enough blood to transfuse. We need to stop the hemorrhage,” Silver said.

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