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Featured Stories

'No water available': Coalition warns Colorado River could drop to critical lows, calls for nine urgent reforms

With a Nov. 11 federal deadline and reservoirs near critical lows, report urges curtailments, conservation and dam fixes — and faults a stalled review excluding the public.

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[By Andrew Christiansen and Brooke Larsen](#)

The Colorado River could reach dangerously low levels as soon as next year under dry conditions, and environmental groups say leaders aren't acting quickly enough to address the crisis.



Photo caption: The Colorado River flows through Professor Valley outside of Moab on Aug. 30.
Photo by Doug McMurdo

To mark the start of the new water year on Oct. 1, the Great Basin Water Network, Utah Rivers Council, Glen Canyon Institute and Living Rivers–Colorado Riverkeeper released a report titled “[No Water Available: Commonsense Recommendations to Limit Colorado River Conflict](#),” outlining nine urgent reforms they argue could prevent deeper crises.

The proposals range from enforceable curtailment plans and a moratorium on new dams and diversions to re-engineering Glen Canyon Dam, protecting tribal rights, conserving groundwater and expanding both municipal and farm water conservation.

“We’re hoping that it’s going to be a new era for the Colorado River Basin because the way the river is being governed right now is simply not working,” said Zach Frankel, director of the Utah Rivers Council.

A strained system

The river supplies water to 40 million people across seven states, 30 tribal nations and Mexico. But its average flows have fallen roughly 20% compared with 20th-century averages, as shrinking snowpack and hotter temperatures erode runoff.

Recent [forecasts from the Bureau of Reclamation](#) show Lake Powell could approach levels too low to generate electricity at Glen Canyon Dam as soon as late 2026 if dry conditions continue. Meanwhile, representatives from the basin states — Arizona, California, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, Utah and Wyoming — have been negotiating how to share the river after current operating guidelines expire at the end of 2026.

In June, Department of Interior officials [set a Nov. 11, 2025 deadline](#) for the states to submit a preliminary operations agreement, with a final seven-state proposal due by mid-February next year. Federal officials have said the goal is to reach a final decision by next summer so new rules are ready to take effect with the 2027 operating year.

A [white paper](#) published Sept. 11 warned that water use along the Colorado River already exceeds natural flows and that shortages are worsening, demanding immediate action.

“We’re so focused on the post-’26 negotiations ... we actually have taken our eye off the ball that we have a crisis right now,” said Jack Schmidt, director of the Center for Colorado River Studies at Utah State and co-author of the paper. “And to deal with that crisis right now, it’s going to take actions right now.”

But while the need for action is clear to advocates, they say the federal process itself has broken down. Kyle Roerink, executive director of the Great Basin Water Network, called it a “transparency crisis” at a press conference Wednesday, Oct. 1, noting that federal officials have not released expected draft plans this year as part of the ongoing review under the National Environmental Policy Act. That’s the federal process that requires agencies to analyze impacts and alternatives before adopting new post-2026 operating rules for the river.

“All of that is accompanied by robust opportunities for public participation and right now there’s a lot of uncertainty about what we are actually going to get,” he said. “What we want to underscore, more than anything else, is that we need more transparency and we need more accountability. I think if we had more of those things, we wouldn’t be in the situation that we are currently in today.”

The report outlines nine steps its authors say could help stabilize a system stretched beyond its limits. Roerink said one of the most urgent reforms is requiring all basin states to reduce water use. While Lower Basin states — Arizona, California and Nevada — already face tiered, enforceable reductions when Lake Mead drops, he argued Upper Basin states — Utah, Colorado, New Mexico and Wyoming — are planning for increased future use.

“All we know is that Upper Basin entities want to use more, and they’re dragging their feet — and it’s time that that ends,” he said.

Frankel said the reductions currently on the table — about 1.5 to 2 million acre-feet — are nowhere near enough.

“So far in the first 25 years of this century, we see 12.2 million acre-feet ... We need to cut 5 million acre-feet of use from the Colorado River, and they are not going to be able to agree to anything near that much,” he said.

Another priority is stopping new dams and diversions at a time when the river is already over-allocated. The report singles out Utah’s Lake Powell Pipeline and Green River water exchanges.

“Lake Powell could be empty in 12 months,” said John Weisheit, co-founder and executive director of Living Rivers. “Yet the state of Utah continues to approve more and more applications to take water out of the Green River.”

The coalition also warns that Glen Canyon Dam — once considered a cornerstone of the system — has become a liability. Balken said a 2023 low-elevation release damaged the dam’s outlet works, showing they can’t be relied on in future shortages.

“This dam is becoming a huge roadblock to water deliveries and posing a huge risk to users in the lower basin,” he said.



Photo caption: Glen Canyon Dam and high-voltage transmission towers in Page, Ariz. on Tuesday, May 20, 2025. Photo by Trent Nelson/The Salt Lake Tribune

He added that managers should now treat the “minimum power pool” — the point at which water no longer is able to pass through the hydropower turbines— as the river’s new “Dead Pool,” saying that below that line water can no longer be reliably released downstream. According to Balken, that would leave just 6.3 million acre-feet of usable storage between Lakes Powell and Mead.

Conservation is another focus. The report highlights turf-removal programs in Nevada, California and Arizona as examples for Utah and other states.

“Utah is notoriously the worst water user in its municipalities and Colorado isn’t much better,” said Gary Wockner, director of Save the Colorado, noting that “Denver Water has no cash-for-grass program.”

Roerink said agriculture, which uses about 70% of the river’s supply, must also adapt with more efficient irrigation and crop changes. But advocates cautioned that regions with senior water rights — such as California’s Imperial Valley — grow much of the country’s winter produce and cannot absorb all of the cuts.

Other recommendations in the report include:

- Closer regulation of groundwater pumping near tributaries, since heavy withdrawals can reduce connected surface flows.
- Maintaining minimum flows in the river to support fish, wildlife and ecosystems.
- Honoring tribal rights, which account for about 20% of the basin’s legal allocations but remain largely undeveloped.
- Updating planning assumptions to reflect today’s reduced river flows rather than relying on past, higher averages.

What’s at stake

Coalition members said the Colorado River crisis threatens water supplies for millions of people, agriculture that feeds the country and ecosystems throughout the basin if stronger measures are not taken.

Frankel warned that “we could see serious water crashes this water year in the next 12 months” and said the current pace of negotiations “is not happening fast enough, it’s not innovative enough, and it’s not sizable enough.”

Cullen McGinnis of the Sierra Club’s Toiyabe Chapter said the crisis will affect farms, families and ecosystems alike.

“The Colorado River is the foundation of life in the Southwest ... but right now, the river is overallocated, underprotected and in crisis,” he said. “What’s needed now is bold leadership.”

Others stressed the consequences of a closed-door process for negotiations.

“As members of the public, as water experts, we’re left to guess, and it’s designed exclusively to keep the public from understanding what is being discussed,” Frankel said.

Roerink added that the best outcome in the months ahead would be “just some real information from the powers that be,” instead of what he called “little scraps and tidbits of nothingness.”