

A simple Colorado River story: use less water

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by Allen Best for Big Pivots



A child amid the splish-splashes of water at Denver's Union Station on June 21, 2025. Photos/Allen Best

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A few hours before I read a new Colorado River Basin report this week, I was at a neighborhood meeting in the metropolitan Denver municipality where I live. A sustainability plan is being worked up. The water component will encourage conservation.

I said that the messaging on this, unlike some other components of sustainability, should be relatively easy. After all, 75% of this municipality's water arrives from the headwaters of the Colorado River through the Moffat Tunnel.

And most everybody at this point understands that the Colorado River is in trouble. For more than 20 years we have seen the photos of the bathtub rings of the reservoirs and the water levels far below. So many years have yielded below-average runoffs, a 20% reduction

altogether in the 21st century. The number of broken hottest-ever temperature records have vastly dwarfed the coldest-ever records.

Understanding the intricate efforts to better align the political governance of the river with the physical reality is a far more difficult story to tell, but it has not been for absence of effort in Big Pivots and hundreds of other outlets. Scores of stories have been written in just the last month or more about the seeming inability of negotiators from the seven basin states to come to agreements in advance of a November deadline set by the federal government.

Now comes a new report, “There’s No Water Available,” from Great Basin Water Network and partners. It offers nine recommendations under the subtitle of “Commonsense Recommendations to Limit Colorado River Conflict.”

If longer-term drought is one component of the declined flows, the science is now firm that the warming climate is a reality that will remain and with it more erratic precipitation, surprising shifts in temperature, dry soils and many other factors. “It is clear that the future will be about adapting to hydrologic extremes. It is also clear that the water laws and hydraulic engineering developed in the 20th century did not foresee the realities we face today,” says the report.

Then there is this arresting statement:

“The supply-focused approaches during the last 120 years — i.e. encouraging use — has landed us in crisis. It’s time for a fresh, modernized approach. Nevertheless, we believe that the necessary change isn’t as complicated as people in power want us to believe.”



Above, field workers near Yuma, Ariz. Photos/Allen Best

Simply put, say the authors from the Glen Canyon Institute, Sierra Club and other organizations, we must use less water. “We can do so in an equitable way that does not involve foot-dragging and finger-pointing.”

Who needs to budge? Well, almost everybody — the historically shorted Native Americans being the exception. “All parties currently using water must commit to using less water than they have in the past,” says the report.

Upper basin states — Colorado, New Mexico, Utah and Wyoming — come in for special mention. Perhaps it’s a negotiating tactic, but they have continued to maintain detailed estimates of how much more water they want to use. “Rather than planning on using more, we need states to plan on cutting,” says the report.

They call for all states to have curtailment plans. “Having a clear-cut understanding of what entities have to cut during shortages is something that’s already in place in the lower Basin. The upper basin must develop a similar system of cuts predicated on water availability and delivery obligations that consider downstream use and upper basin water availability.”

Andy Mueller, general manager of the Colorado River Water Conservation District, the lead water agency for much of Colorado’s Western Slope, made that call at the district’s annual meeting in 2024. Some agreed. See: [“Heading for the Colorado River cliff.”](#) Big Pivots, Oct. 20, 2024. However, Jim Lochhead, a former Western Slope resident and then Denver Water CEO, said he believed that the process of preparing for a compact curtailment was too difficult, too messy, until the clear need arrives. See: [“Bone-dry winter in the San Juans.”](#) Big Pivots, Jan. 28, 2025.

The upper basin states have argued that they never used the water allocated under the Colorado River Compact of 1922, while the lower-basin states did — and then some. Only lately have the lower-basin state tightened their belt. The upper basin states don’t want to be restricted — not, at least, to the same degree.

This position was explained in a forum during May by Becky Mitchell, Colorado’s representative in the negotiations. She talked about how the upper-basin had developed more slowly and still has not used its full allocation. See: [“Sharing risk on the Colorado River,”](#) Big Pivots, May 29, 2025.

“The main thing that we got from the compact was the principle of equity and the ability to develop at our own pace,” said Mitchell. “We shouldn’t be punished because we didn’t develop to a certain number.” The conversation, she added, is “what does equity look like right now?”

Upper-basin states want a willingness in this settlement for agreement that focuses on the water supply, not the demand, she said. “Common sense would tell you, maybe Mother Nature should drive how we operate the system.” That, she said, is the bedrock principle of the proposal from the upper division.

This new report rejects this “natural flow” plan. “Agencies do not yet have the means to quickly and accurately measure natural flow data, a measurement metric that tracks water as if there were no human usage and infrastructure. That’s because the basin at-large is missing key data points.”



Above: The Colorado River at Silt looked healthy in early June, and indeed runoff from the river's headwaters in northern Colorado was near normal. The overall runoff, though, was far, far below average — what is becoming a new norm. Photo/ Allen Best

The report also argues that any new dams and diversions need to be off the shelf, cities can do a better job of conservation, and Glen Canyon Dam needs work to allow it to be functional at lower water levels. The report also recommends making farms resilient to new realities.

Some elements of the Colorado River conversations have shifted dramatically. One of them is the new insistence of the last 10 years that the water rights of tribes be honored. Representatives of tribal nations now are almost always on the agenda at water conferences in Colorado. Twenty years ago? No, they were not. Lorelei Cloud, the chair of the Colorado Water Conservation Board since May, is a member of the Southern Ute Reservation.

Of the basin's 30 tribes, 22 have recognized rights to 3.2 million acre-feet of Colorado River system water annually. That's approximately 25% of the basin's average annual water supply. Twelve tribes have still-unresolved claims. It is estimated that 65% of tribal water is unused by tribal communities (but in many cases consigned to other users). Junior users would be curtailed in order to honor those tribal rights, says the report.

The connection between declines in groundwater and surface flows is also part of a broader shift in the conversation. A May 2025 study that groundwater supplies in the Colorado River

Basins are shrinking by nearly 1.3 million acre-feet per year. Excessive groundwater depletion had surfaced as a surrogate water supply to satisfy surface water deficits.

In the upper basin, half the water we see at the surface comes from groundwater, according to research from the U.S. Geological Survey. “This seminal USGS analysis underscores that as temperatures rise and evapotranspiration rates increase, there will be less groundwater entering surface water systems.”

There are obvious limitations to a short report, and I found the agriculture and municipal sections too shallow. The bibliography of sources, though, was quite valuable.

Will we see other reports of a similar nature in coming weeks and months? Quite likely. This conversation is far from over. In some ways, it’s just beginning.

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