

Feds call for public input on how to manage the strained Colorado River



Lexi Peery

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KUER

The iconic horseshoe bend of the Colorado River near Page, Ariz., March 21, 2022.

Lake Powell is an important water storage facility and source of hydropower in the West. The reservoir is at an elevation of 3,539 feet.

Decades of [drought](#) and [overuse](#) has put the [Colorado River](#), and millions of its users, in a dire situation. The Bureau of Reclamation announced Thursday it's looking for public input on how the resource should be managed, which some Utah officials aren't too happy about.

The seven basin states, Mexico and tribal nations are renegotiating how to manage the river in the long-term, with the current rules set to [expire in 2026](#). They're also looking at how to get through the coming months as the system's largest reservoirs hit critically low levels. Lake Powell and Lake Mead [are both about 28% full](#).

At a [Colorado River Authority of Utah](#) meeting Thursday, Brian Steed, the state's executive director of natural resources, said Reclamation's call for public input makes him nervous.

"This has been for the states to decide and to propose and not for the feds to dictate and frame," he said. "It worries me that it looks like it's going the other direction with the feds framing it."

The public input period runs until Sept. 1. Reclamation officials said in a release they're looking at starting the formal [National Environmental Policy Act](#) process in early 2023, which will help determine post-2026 guidelines.

"We want to hear from everyone who has a stake in this basin. We intend to develop our next operating rules in an inclusive, transparent manner, relying on the best available science," said Senior Water Resources Program Manager Carly Jerla in the release.

This could open "Pandora's Box," Steed said and could diminish the voices of the basin states.

In the short term, federal officials have [called on basin states](#) to commit to unprecedented water conservation measures. Reclamation Commissioner Camille Calimlim Touton said "between 2 and 4 million acre-feet of additional conservation is needed just to protect critical levels in 2023," as [KUNC reported](#). Basin states have 60 days to come up with a deal before the federal government steps in.

The "essence of the problem" is water use among Lower Basin states is not declining, said [Gene Shawcroft](#), the Colorado River commissioner for Utah.

"Now, I [can't] tell you that the Upper Division states are not going to feel some pain, that will happen," he said. "But regardless of the pain we feel, we can't solve the problem. The problems have to be solved in the lower division states."

The Lower Basin states — Arizona, Nevada and California — use a majority of the river's flow for large cities and irrigation.

Some Upper Basin states — Utah, Colorado, Wyoming and New Mexico — are [still eyeing large water development projects](#), saying they've used less of their allocation for years.