Reclamation commissioner to testify on 'extreme drought'

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Amid the nation's worst drought in nearly 1,200 years, the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee this week will look at how to deal with shrinking water supplies across the West.

The full committee will hold a hearing on "short- and long-term solutions to extreme drought" tomorrow, featuring testimony from Bureau of Reclamation Commissioner Camille Touton.

The hearing comes in the wake of a new Reclamation study published last week that examined the historical record of the Colorado River Basin going back 2,000 years.

That research, which relied on the historical record of the river left behind in tree rings, lakes, bogs and caves, suggests the region could become even drier than the current "megadrought."

During the second century, the basin dropped to just 68 percent of average water flow.

By comparison, during the current 22-year megadrought, the Colorado River is at about 84 percent of its average water flows (Greenwire, June 9).

That current shortage has prompted Reclamation to take "extraordinary actions" in recent weeks to bolster Lake Powell by nearly 1 million acre-feet to prevent a potential shutdown of the hydropower at the Glen Canyon Dam (Greenwire, May 3).

The three lower basin states — California, Arizona and Nevada — are also preparing for additional cuts in water usage as the Colorado River continues to shrink (Greenwire, June 7).

Colorado Sen. Michael Bennet (D) called on his colleagues last week to put the drought on par with other natural disasters, like hurricanes and floods, describing it as a "five-alarm fire" (E&E News PM, June 7).

"If we don’t get our act together here, it’s going to not only put our Western agriculture at risk, but the American West as we know it," Bennett said at a hearing held by the Senate Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry Subcommittee on Conservation, Climate, Forestry and Natural Resources.

Schedule: The hearing is Tuesday, June 14, at 10 a.m. in 366 Dirksen and via webcast.

Witnesses:

- Camille Touton, Bureau of Reclamation commissioner.
- John Entsminger, general manager, Southern Nevada Water Authority.
- Maurice Hall, vice president, Climate Resilient Water Systems, Environmental Defense Fund.
- Patrick O'Toole, president, Family Farm Alliance.
- Charlie Stern, specialist in natural resources policy, Congressional Research Service.