

'The system is at a tipping point': Feds say unprecedented cuts needed to balance Colorado River water budget, prop up Lake Powell

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The savings accounts are running dry and it's time to make big budget cuts.

That was the message Bureau of Reclamation Commissioner Camille Touton delivered to the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources earlier this week, speaking about water use in the Colorado River basin.

"The system is at a tipping point," Touton said. Lake Mead and Lake Powell, the nation's two largest reservoirs, are at or near historic lows after a two-decade-long megadrought that has been linked to climate change.

"Unprecedented is now the reality and the normal in which Reclamation must manage our systems," she said. "A warmer,

drier West is what we are seeing today.”

In order to protect critical reservoir levels in 2023, Touton said, between 2 and 4 million acre-feet of additional water conservation will likely be needed.

Cuts of that magnitude would be the biggest in the 100-year history of the Colorado River Compact, which laid the groundwork in 1922 for dividing the river’s water between seven Southwestern states, 30 tribal nations and Mexico.

According to preliminary water use estimates released earlier this week, the Upper Basin states of Utah, Colorado, Wyoming and New Mexico collectively used 3.5 million acre-feet of Colorado River water last year, down from 4.5 million acre-feet the year prior.

Amy Haas, the executive director of the Colorado River Authority of Utah, said if 2 to 4 million acre-feet must be conserved, the Lower Basin states of California, Arizona and Nevada will have to do the heaviest lifting because they use the vast majority of the water.

“The Commissioner’s announcement shows that the federal government is ready to act, especially with respect to reducing uses in the three Lower Basin states,” Haas said in an email.

“This is encouraging but is yet another quick and temporary fix designed to chase dire hydrology in the short-term.”

Haas said that longer-term solutions are needed to adapt to rapidly changing conditions in the basin.

“The need for a sustainable solution,” she continued, “is especially urgent given that the Colorado River system is vastly out of balance — far more water is being used, especially by the Lower Basin states, than is available due to the current drought of record and climate change impacts.

She noted that the Lower Basin states and Mexico used 10 million acre-feet of water last year, according to the provisional estimates, nearly three times the Upper Basin’s use when the river supplied only 6.3 million acre-feet due to near-record low runoff in 2021.

Since 2000, the river’s average annual flow has been 8.4 million acre-feet, and the amount of water stored in Lake Powell and Lake Mead has fallen by, on average, 2 million acre-feet annually.

But Tanya Trujillo, assistant secretary for water and science with the Department of the Interior, said Thursday that all of the Colorado River states will have to play a role in the reductions, which will likely amount to “massive reductions in water use.”

“We need to be taking action in all states, in all sectors, and in all available ways,” Trujillo said at a water conference hosted

by the University of Colorado's Getches-Wilkinson Center.

"We're going to likely be in a situation of doing things we've never done before, and we'll have to have the guts to be able to move forward in some of these situations."

The Bureau of Reclamation [set a 60-day timeline](#) for basin states and tribes to contribute ideas to a plan, but Touton said Tuesday that the federal government also has the authority to "act unilaterally" to reduce water diverted in federal projects.

Both Trujillo and Touton said the actions are needed in order to protect infrastructure, including hydropower production from the Glen Canyon and Hoover dams.

Dan Beard, who served as commissioner of Reclamation under President Bill Clinton, said current federal officials inherited a tough position that was not of their own making.

"For nearly two decades," he said in an interview, "there has been report after report after report pointing out the challenges associated with climate change and the impacts that that's going to have on the Colorado River basin system."

Beard said that previous administrations from both political parties have effectively ignored the warnings, "and in fact, in many cases they were climate deniers."

But the federal government's current scramble to protect hydropower operations at Glen Canyon Dam should not, in

Beard's view, be driving decision-making.

"They're turning themselves inside out to prop up a facility that isn't needed," he said, noting that the Glen Canyon Dam provides only a fraction of the electricity to the Western grid and that it's no longer providing any water storage benefits.

Beard has long advocated for decommissioning the Glen Canyon Dam and using the Hoover Dam, which creates Lake Mead, for water storage and hydropower purposes. The proposal could give water managers more flexibility in the current crisis.

Lake Powell sees millions of visitors annually, and power sales from the Glen Canyon Dam fund important environmental programs as well as dam maintenance and irrigation projects. Neither Trujillo nor Touton discussed reengineering the dam to allow Lake Powell to drain in their comments this week, and Beard acknowledged that his viewpoint is in the minority.

"The only thing that's sustainable in the long term is less consumption in the Lower Basin," said Gene Shawcroft, Utah's Colorado River Commissioner, who represents Utah in interstate water negotiations. "Now that doesn't mean, in my mind, that the upper division doesn't need to continue to look at conservation, which we're doing aggressively." The Legislature passed [a number of important water conservation bills this year](#).

The Upper Basin states have to be responsive to the runoff patterns because all of the Colorado River diversions in Utah are upstream of Lake Powell, mostly on the Green River before it meets the Colorado.

Utah took a significant cut in what it could have collected last year simply because the water wasn't there, Shawcroft said, adding that all users will need to chip in to do more this year.

About 27% of the water used in Utah comes from the Colorado River system, and 62% of that goes to agriculture. In the basin as a whole, agriculture uses 80% of the river's water. Municipal water users in Utah use more water per person — [and pay lower water rates](#) — than residents of Las Vegas, Phoenix and Tucson, largely because those cities have implemented numerous programs to discourage thirsty landscaping like lawns.