

Under federal pressure, Colorado River water managers face unprecedented call for conservation

States have 60 days to craft a deal.

by Alex Hager & Luke Runyon/KUNC

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Lake Mead and the rest of the Colorado River system are shrinking rapidly. The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation has called

for new conservation measures, asking states to conserve a tremendously large amount of water, and giving them a 60-day timeline to formulate a plan for those reductions.

Colorado River water managers are facing a monumental task. Federal officials have given leaders in seven Western states a new charge -- to commit to an unprecedented amount of conservation and do it before an August deadline.

Without major cutbacks in water use, the nation's two largest reservoirs — Lake Powell and Lake Mead — are in danger of reaching critically low levels.

On June 14, Bureau of Reclamation commissioner Camille Calimlim Touton came to a Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources hearing with a prognosis, a goal and a threat.

First came the prognosis for the beleaguered river that supplies 40 million people in the Southwest and has seen its flows reduced due to 22 years of higher temperatures.

"There's so much to this that is unprecedented, and that is true. But unprecedented is now the reality and a normal in which Reclamation must manage our systems," Touton told the committee. "A warmer, drier West is what we are seeing today."

The Colorado River's big reservoirs are at record lows. Lake

Mead sits at 28% of its capacity, and Lake Powell is at 27% capacity. They're both projected to drop further as the year progresses. Touton set the goal to keep them from dropping to levels where hydropower production ceases and where it becomes physically impossible to move water through the dams.

"Between 2 and 4 million acre-feet of additional conservation is needed just to protect critical levels in 2023," Touton said.

To compare, the entire state of Colorado uses about 2.2 million acre-feet from the river each year.

Touton finished her remarks with the threat. If the seven states that rely on the Colorado River can't cut their own use, the federal government is prepared to do it for them, Touton said. She gave a 60-day deadline to craft a deal.

The announcement sent shockwaves across the watershed.

"I think this call is to everyone," said Colby Pellegrino, deputy general manager of the Southern Nevada Water Authority, which supplies water to the Las Vegas metro area. "If you're using Colorado River water in any way, you should be internalizing how you can help solve the problem."

Agriculture uses the vast majority of the Southwest's scarce water supplies. Between 75% and 80% of the Colorado River's water flows to romaine lettuce, alfalfa hay and fruit orchards

from Colorado to Mexico. Cities like Las Vegas have been able to grow in population while keeping their water use in check, Pellegrino said. Even if spigots to her city, Phoenix, and Los Angeles are turned off, the river still has a supply-demand problem, she said.

"You can get rid of all of the municipal use and you still don't get to 2 to 4 million acre feet. So it's going to require all sectors to participate," she said.

Cajoling all the basin's big water users to participate is no small feat. Many still feel like their water rights are legally protected, and doubt that the federal government really has the authority to force conservation on the states. But recently the Bureau of Reclamation has shown itself ready to take matters into their own hands with minimal consultation with the states. In July 2021 the agency began emergency releases of water upstream of Lake Powell to boost its levels. Some state leaders say federal officials gave them little warning.

A familiar tension between the river's two basins has cropped up as Commissioner Touton's announcement rippled through the complex web of Colorado River decision makers. Thirsty cities and irrigated farmland in the river's Lower Basin, made up of Nevada, California and Arizona, use the majority of its flow. Meanwhile Upper Basin leaders in Colorado, Utah, Wyoming and New Mexico have kept water use well below their entitlement and complained that they bear the full risk

that climate change poses to the basin.

"What we have observed as the deep risk is now no longer on the horizon, no longer at the curb. It is now at the front door," said Chuck Cullom, executive director of the Upper Colorado River Commission.

States in that group – Colorado, Wyoming, New Mexico and Utah – have a history of struggling to commit to specific conservation goals when it comes to the river's management. Cullom said he would not speculate on whether Upper Basin states would be willing to come up with specific volumes of conservation following Touton's announcement. Several Upper Basin states have projects in the works that would end up increasing their reliance on Colorado River water.

"We should manage everyone's expectations on where the solutions can come from," Cullom said. "Since the Lower Basin has the most significant volume of uses, then it makes sense that that's where most of the solution comes from."

States in the Colorado River basin have taken longer to come up with plans to conserve less water. So a plan to save millions of acre-feet, and just 60 days to put it together, stands out as a challenge.

"I expect that there will just have to be action by the Department of Interior as was essentially threatened," said

Sarah Porter, director of the Kyl Center for Water Policy. "It's hard for me to see how the seven states could come up with that much water in a couple of months."

Even though the amount of water is tremendous, Porter said this announcement should not come as a surprise. Hotter and drier conditions have plagued the basin for more than two decades. If water managers had started cutting their use earlier, as scientists cautioned they should, this summer's heavy lift might have been avoided.

"It might have been easier in years past to hope, 'Yeah, it's been terrible for the last two years, but maybe next year it will be better,'" Porter said. "Now, it's been terrible for three years. Maybe next year will be better. Well, we're finally at a point where we can't say that."

It will be hard for states to make plans without more clarity on the actual amount of water they need to conserve, Porter said of the "very large spread" between 2 and 4 million acre feet. What is clear, she said, is that demands for the Colorado River's water need to shrink. Figuring out who gets less and when is up for intense debate this summer.

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