

# **Colorado River drought may be the 'new normal' and living with it will be costly, leaders say**

Arizona needs to rapidly invest in both water conservation and new supplies to offset losses from a shrinking Colorado River, the state's top water officials warned Friday.

From the millions of dollars the state is paying users to leave water in the river's largest reservoir to the \$1 billion lawmakers could spend to fund a new Arizona Water

Authority, the future of water security for the fast-growing state will be costly. Water managers at a shortage briefing urged Arizonans to consider the river that supplies a third of their state's water as permanently challenged.

"We need significant action," state Water Resources Director Tom Buschatzke said, "really significant action."

Already, because of a federally declared shortage on the river, the Central Arizona Project is pumping only about two-thirds of what it once did through its canal to the Phoenix and Tucson areas. Forecasts for continuing declines in river storage at Lake Mead and Lake Powell suggest even deeper cuts over the next two years.

"This may be the new normal," CAP General Manager Ted Cooke said, referring to a river diminished by 22 years of drought and a warming climate. "This may be what we have to live with, ostensibly forever."

The state is paying \$40 million to water providers who agree to leave their water in Lake Mead this year and next, and CAP is adding \$20 million each year. But Cooke said that sort of compensation is not guaranteed in future years, and continued losses would be painful to those relying on canal water. Rates also must rise when less water flows through the canal, so CAP can repay its construction debt.

Arizona's river-dependent cities, who have previously banked excess water in the ground, have sufficient supplies to keep tap water coming despite the cutbacks, and municipal water officials say they're [not ready to restrict outdoor watering](#). But Buschatzke said they and all water users must help in the fight to save the Southwest's biggest single supply.

Both water managers support Gov. Doug Ducey's plan for an Arizona Water Authority stocked with a \$1 billion budget to find new sources of water over the next three years. The governor [proposed that in his State of the State address](#) in January, and suggested it could help the state partner on a plant that desalinates seawater. If a plant is built in Mexico, states who invest in it could take part of Mexico's share of the river in return.

A state water authority's envisioned compensation for a declining supply would take a lot of time and money, Cooke said, but it is an important step beyond conservation.

"We can't really count on Mother Nature," he said.



## **Import water from the Mississippi?**

The legislation to create and fund such an authority initially stalled, but House Speaker Rusty Bowers on Friday said it is gaining bipartisan support and he hopes to pass it, either this session or in a special session.

"We're moving forward," he said.

The state can help farmers who use 72% of Arizona's water get more efficient, he said, but it also must protect vegetables and other products grown on what he called some of the world's most productive farmlands.

"We don't want to throw that away, but there are smarter ways to do it," he said.

Asked about potential targets for new supplies, Bowers told The Arizona Republic that one option is to pump floodwaters from the Mississippi River basin, either to Colorado's Front Range or to New Mexico's Rio Grande. From the Rio Grande, it could be pumped to the Gila River's headwaters and flow to Phoenix.

Kansas lawmakers who want to import water to western Kansas are interested in participating, Bowers said, though he acknowledged any such plan would likely be too expensive for a few states to handle on their own.

"It would be a federal investment," he said. Bowers believes that would make more sense than the government paying to help rebuild New Orleans or other areas damaged by floods.

The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, which manages the Colorado River dams, pondered but did not propose a similar scheme when it [studied the river basin's future](#) 10 years ago. That study imagined piping water from the Missouri River, a major Mississippi tributary, to the Denver area, where it could replace water diverted from the Colorado.

The agency determined then that building a pipeline to move 600,000 acre-feet (coincidentally, about the same amount that Arizona expects to give up from the Colorado next year) would cost \$8.6 billion. Pumping the water 700 miles would raise the total price to \$1,700 an acre-foot. An acre-

foot equals about 326,000 gallons and could support a few households for a year.

By contrast, Arizona cities currently pay less than \$200 for an acre-foot of Colorado River water.

The costs for a pipeline likely have risen with inflation in the decade since the basin study. The Bureau of Reclamation has not conducted or begun any updated cost studies for such imports, said Dan Bunk, who leads the agency's Boulder Canyon Operations Office near Hoover Dam.



## **Fix the 'leaky bucket' first**

Arizona House Minority Leader Reginald Bolding agreed there's bipartisan support for a water authority to assist with such projects as water recycling, but said the search for new water from outside the state shouldn't overshadow the need for better policy within.

For instance, he said, lawmakers need to address the



[unregulated depletion of rural groundwater by industrial farms](#), another proposal that has so far not advanced in this year's legislative session. Paying big for new water sources while maintaining a “leaky bucket” makes no sense, he said.

“We can’t fix the water crisis without looking at water holistically,” said Bolding, D-Laveen.

Whatever legislators ultimately decide about new supplies, a more immediate remedy may already exist underfoot. The [Gila River Indian Community](#), a major holder of Colorado River rights in lieu of water that others drained from the Gila, has banked more of it in its underground aquifer than what flowed through the CAP in a normal year before the shortage. It also stands to lose river water — 40,000 acre-feet — if Reclamation declares a deeper shortage next year.

To slow Lake Mead’s decline and possibly delay more losses, the Gila River Community is talking with neighboring cities and other water providers about selling them credits for later use of the groundwater, tribal Gov. Stephen Roe Lewis said. That would allow those governments to leave some of their own river water in Lake Mead for everyone’s future.

“Now is the time to lead,” Lewis said.

**'Culture change' sought:** [Why Arizona cities won't impose water restrictions yet](#)

There's little time to stave off the next level of shortage, one that would take another 80,000 acre-feet out of Arizona, including the Gila River Community's share. The federal government will decide on next year's shortage level when it makes its August forecast of reservoir levels. If hydrologists then predict that Lake Mead's surface will start 2023 less than 1,050 feet above sea level, it will lock in the losses that Lewis seeks to avoid.

The weather could still change by August, but right now, the Bureau of Reclamation predicts the lake will drop a few inches below the threshold that mandates new cuts.

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