



[Home](#)  Biden-Harris Administration Announces Major Mil...

Biden-Harris Administration Announces Major Milestone to Protect Short-Term Stability of Colorado River Basin



President Biden's Investing in America agenda has led to record water savings, helped stave off immediate collapse of Colorado River system

Interior Department continues long-term planning with robust input from Basin States, Tribes and other parties

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WASHINGTON — The Biden-Harris administration today announced a significant milestone in its efforts to protect the stability and sustainability of the Colorado River System and strengthen water security in the West. With historic water conservation enabled by President Biden's Investing in America agenda, the Administration has [staved off the immediate possibility](#) of the Colorado River System's reservoirs from falling to critically low elevations that would threaten water deliveries and power production. Due to record conservation investments as well as improved hydrology, Lake Mead levels today, at elevation 1075 feet, are the highest since May 2021, when they were at 1073 feet.

Today, the Department of the Interior's Bureau of Reclamation released a [final Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement](#) (SEIS) in the ongoing, collaborative effort to update the current interim operating guidelines for the near-term operation of Glen Canyon and Hoover Dams to address the ongoing drought and impacts from the climate crisis. The identified preferred alternative reflects a historic, consensus-based proposal –secured by the Biden-Harris administration in partnership with the seven Colorado Basin states –that will lead to at least 3 million acre-feet (maf) of system water conservation savings through the end of 2026, when the current guidelines expire.

As part of these water use reductions, the Department today also announced three new System Conservation Implementation Agreements that will commit water entities in California to conserve up to 399,153 acre-feet water in Lake Mead through 2026. The Department also announced additional progress with the Republic of Mexico to conserve Colorado River System water.

"President Biden made a promise to the American people to invest in communities, bolster climate resiliency, and protect our nation's natural and cultural resources –and our collective efforts to protect the stability of the Colorado River System reflect significant efforts to uphold that promise," said **Acting Deputy Secretary Laura Daniel-Davis**. "Today's historic action to protect this precious resource and the communities that rely on it is made entirely possible by the President's Investing in America agenda, which is funding crucial projects to conserve water, increase the efficiency of water use, and upgrade existing infrastructure. As we close out this chapter on our short-term efforts, we look toward the future with eyes wide open on how to solve for the challenges that still lie ahead."

"The Biden-Harris administration has been working to bring every tool and every resource to bear as we seek to both minimize the impacts of drought and develop a long-term plan to facilitate conservation and economic growth," said **Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for Water and Science Michael Brain**. "This Administration has held strong to its commitment to work with states, Tribes and communities throughout the West to find consensus solutions in the face of climate change and sustained drought. We will continue to prioritize these key values as we move forward in our long-term planning efforts."

"Reclamation is grateful to our partners across the Basin –including the Basin states Governor's Representatives, the 30 Basin Tribes, water managers, farmers and irrigators, municipalities, power contractors, non-governmental organizations, and other partners and stakeholders –for their unprecedented level of collaboration throughout this process," said **Reclamation Commissioner Camille Calimlim Touton**. "As we move forward, supported by historic investments from the President's Investing in America agenda, we will continue working collaboratively to ensure we have long-term tools and strategies in place to help guide the next era of the Colorado River Basin."

"Today's milestone is the result of strong leadership from the Department of the Interior, complemented by a whole-of-government effort to harness funding and resources from the President's Investing in America agenda, and steadfast engagement from Colorado River Basin states, Tribes, and water users," said **White House Council on Environmental Quality Chair Brenda Mallory**. "The Biden-Harris Administration will continue building partnerships and deploying historic resources to build a more resilient future for the West."

Final SEIS Reflects Months of Collaboration with Basin States, Tribes, Other Parties

In order to protect Glen Canyon and Hoover Dam operations, system integrity, and public health and safety through 2026 –at which point the current interim guidelines expire –an initial draft SEIS was [released](#) in April 2023. Following a [historic consensus-based proposal](#) –which committed to measures to conserve at least 3 maf of system water through the end of 2026 –Reclamation temporarily withdrew the draft SEIS to allow for consideration of the new proposal. The bureau [released](#) a revised draft SEIS in October 2023 as part of the process to fully analyze this proposal.

The preferred alternative will conserve at least 3 maf of system water through the end of 2026 and allows for reducing releases from Lake Powell down to 6 maf if the reservoir is projected below 3,500 feet over the subsequent 12 months. This would be implemented across a range of elevations in Lake Mead and would be in addition to the already existing 2007 Interim Guidelines shortages and contributions under the Lower Basin Drought Contingency Plan. The Record of Decision is anticipated in the coming weeks. Today's announcement is the result of robust discussion with all parties across the Basin –including 27 nation-to-nation consultations with Tribes across the region.

The results of updated SEIS modeling indicate that the risk of reaching critical elevations at Lake Powell and Lake Mead has been reduced substantially. As a result of the commitment to record volumes of conservation in the Basin and improved hydrology, the chance of falling below critical elevations was reduced to eight percent at Lake Powell and four percent at Lake Mead through 2026. However, elevations in these reservoirs remain historically low, and long-term conservation measures will still be necessary to ensure continued water delivery to communities and to protect the long-term sustainability of the Colorado River System.

Historic Funding from President Biden's Investing in America Agenda

President Biden's Investing in America agenda is integral to the efforts to increase near-term water conservation, build long term system efficiency, and prevent the Colorado River System's reservoirs from falling to critically low elevations which would threaten water deliveries and power production. Because of this funding, conservation efforts have already benefited the system this year.

Reclamation today announced three new System Conservation Implementation Agreements in California that will conserve water in Lake Mead, including agreements with:

- **Bard Water District, in cooperation with Metropolitan Water District:** This agreement commits up to 18,090 acre-feet of conserved water through 2026;
- **Coachella Valley Water District:** This agreement commits up to 30,000 acre-feet of conserved water through 2026;
- **Palo Verde Irrigation District, in cooperation with Metropolitan Water District:** This agreement commits up to 351,063 acre-feet of conserved water through 2026;

In total, 24 conservation agreements across California and Arizona are expected to conserve up to 1.58 maf of water through 2026, with an investment of up to \$670.2 million from the Inflation Reduction Act, which overall provides \$4.6 billion to address the historic drought across the West. Reclamation continues to work with local partners on addition conservation agreements under development.

Through the [Bipartisan Infrastructure Law](#), Reclamation is also investing another \$8.3 billion over five years for water infrastructure projects, including water purification and reuse, water storage and conveyance, desalination and dam safety. Since the Law's signing, the Department has provided more than \$2.9 billion to fund 425 projects, including \$825 million for 131 aging infrastructure projects; \$377 million to 231 WaterSMART grants; \$382 million for 12 water storage and conveyance projects; and \$698 million to seven rural water projects.

In addition, the International Boundary and Water Commission and Reclamation are leading a complementary effort with the Republic of Mexico on additional water savings measures Mexico will implement through 2026. We continue to work bilaterally and cooperatively with Mexico as an integral part of our short and long-term planning processes for the future of this Basin.

Long-Term Planning Continues with Robust Collaboration

The short-term SEIS process is separate from the [ongoing long-term efforts](#) to protect the Colorado River Basin starting in 2027. The post-2026 process currently underway is working to develop new guidelines that will replace the 2007 Colorado River Interim Guidelines for Lower Basin Shortages and the Coordinated Operations for Lake Powell and Lake Mead, which are set to expire at the end of 2026.

The post-2026 process is a multi-year effort that will identify a range of alternatives and ultimately determine operations for Lake Powell and Lake Mead and other water management actions for decades into the future. Using the best-available science, Reclamation will develop a draft environmental impact statement (EIS) that will analyze how future operational guidelines and strategies can be sufficiently robust and adaptive to withstand a broad range of hydrological conditions and ultimately provide greater stability to water users and the public throughout the Colorado River Basin.

The completed draft EIS is anticipated by the end of 2024 and will include a public comment period. Reclamation anticipates a final EIS will be available in late 2025, followed by a Record of Decision in early 2026.

As part of Reclamation's robust and transparent process to gather feedback, the bureau has held several virtual public webinars and continues to engage Basin parties via stakeholder briefings; the formation of a new Federal-Tribes-States working group; two meetings of the Integrated Technical Education Workgroup; and individual communications.

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