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Conservation Organizations Emphasize Need to Protect Environmental Priorities in Colorado River Basin

Denver, CO – Several conservation organizations today urge Colorado River Basin decision-makers to protect critical environmental priorities as they wrestle with Basin management decisions being made over the next several months. The groups warn that ignoring these priorities risks further damage to the Basin’s environment and natural heritage, the foundation of the iconic Colorado River system.

The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation is pursuing a supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (SEIS) process to evaluate the need to partially modify operating criteria for primary Colorado River reservoirs given extreme drought conditions and historically low reservoir levels at Lake Powell and Lake Mead.

While the groups are encouraged to see six of the Basin states [put forward](#) a “consensus based modeling alternative” for Reclamation to consider in the SEIS process, the groups seek to ensure that critical environmental concerns are considered in any operational actions that Reclamation models and evaluates.

As the Colorado River community considers operational changes, seven conservation organizations identify five (5) environmental priorities that are most directly linked to or implicated by the SEIS process, which is expected to be completed in the summer of 2023:

- Investing federal funds in watershed health, long term resilience, and agricultural innovation in the Upper Basin tributaries with high fish and wildlife and recreational value;
- Preserving the Endangered Fish Recovery Programs in the Upper Basin and the Lower Colorado River Multi-Species Conservation Program;
- Safeguarding the integrity of the Grand Canyon ecosystem and recreational values;
- Restoring wetlands at the Salton Sea to minimize toxic dust and benefit bird habitat along the Pacific Flyway;
- Forestalling the loss and continuing restoration of the Colorado River Delta.

“We highlight these particular priorities because, for the Colorado River community, they are closely tied to the continued integrity of the Colorado River Basin and are potentially most affected by the current SEIS process,” said **Jennifer Pitt, Colorado River Program director for National Audubon Society**. “In the face of a hotter, drier climate, the Colorado River—and all of the living things depending on it—require that we stay focused on these priorities.”

“Whatever options Reclamation ultimately considers as part of the SEIS process, these environmental priorities cannot be lost in the mix or sacrificed in the name of a crisis, or we risk making the entire situation worse,” said **Christy Plumer, chief conservation officer for Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership**.

“These and related priorities are essential to the continued sustainability of the Colorado River system. Failing to consider them when making basin management decisions would undermine the ecological health of the Colorado River Basin, adding more potential for controversy in a Basin that needs to move forward—urgently—with consensus efforts to reduce water demand and restore the health of the watershed,” said **Sara Porterfield, western water policy advisor for Trout Unlimited**.

“Our groups have worked hard over the last decade to find environmental solutions that also benefit water users. We want to ensure those hard-won solutions and benefits aren’t sacrificed because of interstate disputes over water allocations,” said **Taylor Hawes, director of the Colorado River Program at The Nature Conservancy**. “We know the Basin’s stakeholders are facing difficult decisions with dropping reservoir levels, drier soils, hotter temperatures, and that adjustments are needed now to deal with those issues in both the Upper and Lower Basins. Nevertheless, we don’t want to lose sight of the risks to the extraordinary natural heritage of the Colorado River,” **Hawes** added.

“We stand ready to work with Basin states, Tribes, water users, and the federal government to ensure that the SEIS process is sufficiently transparent, efficient, and comprehensive,” said **Kevin Moran, associate vice president of regional affairs for Environmental Defense Fund**.

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