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Arizona drought plan's tab could hit \$280 million

By Tony Davis Arizona Daily Star Feb 4, 2019 Updated 4 hrs ago



Gov. Doug Ducey's fiscal 2019-20 budget proposes to pay \$30 million to water users who lose supplies in Lake Mead, above.

John Locher / The Associated Press 2014

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Arizona's drought-contingency plan for the Colorado River is shaping up as a pricey water-saving affair, with a potential tab of up to \$280 million.

The state, the Central Arizona Project and the federal government have approved, or are expected to, the spending of many tens of millions of dollars to compensate river water users who will be losing supplies due to the drought plan.

Millions more will be spent by CAP, the state, possibly by the feds and by irrigation districts on new wells to help farmers go back on the pumps when their CAP supplies run out in a few years.

legislators push Pinal County farmers to use less water

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And the largest single sum, \$97 million, related to the drought plan is not going to conserve a drop of water. It will be used in a complex agreement to buy water and recharge it in the ground to compensate for new pumping for future suburban growth and sprawl. That agreement proved vital in getting the support of influential developer and homebuilder groups for the drought plan in the Legislature.

Here's a breakdown of all the money that will be spent, is likely to be spent or could be spent on programs directly or indirectly connected to the drought plan:

- The Central Arizona Project will pay CAP water users up to \$60 million to compensate them for cuts they take due to the drought plan. For now, it's unsettled who will get that money. But, much if not all, is likely to go the Gila River Indian Community, says the Arizona Department of Water Resources.

Cities losing CAP water could also take some of this money for compensation purposes. But they've said for now they'd rather get "mitigation" water to replace the cuts, instead of money. If the cities choose to take some money instead of water, the Gila tribe would get more water and less money in the way of mitigation, says ADWR.

The three-county agency that operates the CAP hasn't determined yet whether its water ratepayers, property taxpayers or both in Pima, Pinal and Maricopa counties will pay for the compensation.

- Gov. Doug Ducey's fiscal 2019-20 budget proposes to pay \$30 million to water users who leave some of their river water supplies in Lake Mead.

Almost certainly, that money will go to the Colorado River Indian Tribes. They have offered to leave 50,000 acre-feet of their water a year in Lake Mead for three years if compensated.

The tribes, headquartered in Parker, have the most-senior rights to river water in the entire Lower Colorado River Basin. That gives them top priority to get water during shortages.

- Irrigation districts in Pinal County will get \$9 million in state general fund money for new wells and other groundwater infrastructure. They'll get another \$8.75 million over seven years from a fee charged annually to Pinal farmers for withdrawing groundwater. The fee has existed for many years; its funds will be transferred to the well program until 2026.

Another \$5 million for the wells will come from the CAP. The irrigation districts themselves will pay another \$5 million toward well construction.

- Farmers haven't yet succeeded, however, in persuading the Legislature to front another \$20 million to \$25 million for the wells, to be spent while farmers wait for the federal government to give them grants of that amount. The final state drought bill that passed Thursday says only that the Legislature "may consider" other appropriations for the wells while the wait for federal money continues.
- The Central Arizona Groundwater Replenishment District, a three-county agency, has agreed to pay the Gila River tribe \$97 million for the rights to use 33,000 acre-feet of tribal water over 25

years. The water will be recharged into aquifers in Pima, Maricopa and Pinal counties to compensate for groundwater pumped from other aquifers to serve new suburban growth.

That money will ultimately be paid by people who buy those same homes benefiting from the replenished river water.

The deal was negotiated separately from the drought plan discussions, but it's linked to the plan in two ways. Besides the deal's role in gaining the plan support from developers, the Gila tribe said it would not go through with the water-rights deal unless the drought plan was also approved.

- State officials expect the federal government to pay \$21 million to the Gila River tribe to leave about 100,000 acre-feet of its river water in Lake Mead under a program called Intentionally Created Surplus. That water stays in the lake and can be removed by the tribe only if there is a drought plan.
- ADWR officials also expect the Arizona Water Banking Authority to pay the Gila tribe another \$8 million to \$10 million to leave another 50,000 acre-feet in the lake as Intentionally Created Surplus water. That money and the \$21 million were already going to be paid to the tribe for other purposes besides the drought plan.

But now, the tribe has agreed to leave all 150,000 acre-feet of that, paid for with the \$31 million total, to offset other water that's taken from Lake Mead to mitigate losses of river water that other parties, particularly farmers, incur because of the drought plan.

- In passing the drought plan bill, the Legislature also agreed to put another \$2 million of general-fund money into an existing fund for water conservation and augmenting of water supplies in Pima, Pinal and Maricopa counties. That money will go to projects determined by water-user advisory councils in each county. This spending was sparked by criticism of the drought plan by Democratic legislators who said it wasn't doing enough for conservation.
- A collection of nonprofit groups, led by the Walton Family Foundation, has agreed to pay another \$8 million for compensating Arizona river-water users for leaving some of their water in Lake Mead. Other contributors to this effort include the Rockefeller, S.D. Bechtel Jr. and Gordon and Betty Moore foundations.

Walton and some of the other foundations have also financially supported advocacy work for the drought plan done by five environmental groups operating as the Water for Arizona Coalition. They include the Environmental Defense Fund, Arizona Audubon and American Rivers.

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