

Bureau of Reclamation officials explain drought measures in Lower Colorado River Basin

Brent Gardner-Smith Aspen Journalism

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WESTMINSTER —The Bureau of Reclamation's regional director of the Lower Colorado River Basin last week gave the Colorado Water Congress a timely update on drought-contingency planning.

Terry Fulp, who oversees Lake Mead, is the federal government's point person on gaining approval of a set of drought-contingency planning (DCP) agreements in the lower-basin states of Arizona, California and Nevada. Fulp spoke to the water congress Feb. 1 in the Denver suburb.

A day earlier, Arizona Gov. Doug Ducey signed legislation required for that state to move forward with DCP.

In doing so, Ducey barely made the Jan. 31 deadline set by Fulp's boss, Reclamation commissioner Brenda Burman, for the agreements to be signed.

"I can't tell you how pleased we are with the action the Arizona legislature took yesterday," Fulp told the water congress. "That is a major step. But we have lots of other steps to take."

Fulp said there are still a lot of "underlying agreements" that have to be finished.

"This is not unusual in these complex water deals, if I could use that term," Fulp said. "You've just got to pick them all off. I can assure you that every one is being worked on."

Still, the Jan. 31 deadline was missed by the lower-basin states, and Burman duly published a notice in the federal register Feb. 1, giving the states until March 4 to submit proposals on how to complete the deal. If that new deadline is met, the commissioner will rescind the notice in the federal register.

In December, the Upper Colorado River Commission, in a vote of its representatives from Colorado, Utah, Wyoming and New Mexico, approved the DCP agreements pertaining to the upper basin (<https://www.aspentimes.com/news/local/upper-colorado-river-basin-states-approve-drought-management-agreements/>).

But those agreements don't take effect unless the lower-basin DCP agreements also are signed, and the whole deal is then blessed by an act of Congress.

For the water sector in Colorado, the DCP approval process counts as high drama.

"We've never been closer to DCP than we are today," Fulp told the audience of upper-basin water managers and users. "I believe that really holds today. But you've also heard our commissioner say, 'Close isn't done.'"

Noting the recently fallen snow in Westminster, Fulp used a skiing analogy to describe the status of the DCP process.

"It's not a bunny slope left, but we definitely went over the top of the hill (Jan. 31)," Fulp said. "I do believe there are some moguls in front of us, and the question will be: How deep are they?"

"I think we're there in the sense that we've crested that peak," he added later. "We can get these agreements done. There are some disagreements that we're working through, but we will get them done."

Fulp also explained why the lower basin DCP agreements were necessary, starting with a photo of Lake Powell when it was last full, in early 2000.

"How quickly things turned around," he said, pointing to the five very dry years starting in 2000 that sharply dropped the reservoir's level. "And we did the interim guidelines in response to that."

The guidelines, signed in 2007, were designed to balance the water levels in Lake Powell and Lake Mead and to manage the shortages in Lake Mead if the reservoirs kept falling.

And they have — and more than expected, with 2011 being the only really wet year in the Colorado River basin since 2000.

Fulp said the interim guidelines, even under their strictest conditions, would still leave the lower basin 600,000 acre-feet short of water each year. But under DCP, water users in Arizona, California and Nevada will leave much more water in Lake Mead.

However, Fulp said even the DCP agreements might not be enough to keep Lake Mead operating in the face of continued dry conditions.

"Are there are still hydrologies with DCP that would blow us out of the water?" Fulp said. "There are. So this is not the fail safe, but this is the right thing to do."

Also, he noted that the federal government is not driving the DCP deal.

"This is a voluntary, state-driven solution," Fulp said. "This is not a mandated federal secretary-of-the-interior solution."

Still, if the states can't get the deal done, the feds say they will mandate any water-use cutbacks they deem fit.

"The commissioner has made it very clear, absent this solution, that we in the department will, in fact, go figure out what to do," Fulp said. "None of us believe that is the best path. I doubt any of you in this room think that is the best path."

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