

Feds release plan for Colorado River if states don't strike a deal

Ben Winslow; Fox13 SL City; 1/9/26

SALT LAKE CITY — The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation released its proposed plan for managing the Colorado River if the states along the river fail to strike a deal.

The highly-anticipated plan, released Friday, offers a range of alternatives for operations at Lake Powell and Lake Mead, which would impact water supplies for more than 40 million people in the western United States. The proposals range from "no action" to a supply-driven option that could lead to water shortages for Utah and other states.

"Given the importance of a consensus-based approach to operations for the stability of the system, Reclamation has not yet identified a preferred alternative," said acting Commissioner Scott Cameron in a statement. "However, Reclamation anticipates that when an agreement is reached, it will incorporate elements or variations of these five alternatives and will be fully analyzed in the Final EIS enabling the sustainable and effective management of the Colorado River."

The plan could force states to strike a bargain more quickly.

Last month, [FOX 13 News and the Colorado River Collaborative reported from Las Vegas that the Trump administration was warning states to get an agreement in place or they may not like the alternatives.](#)

The current agreements between the states along the Colorado River expire later this year.

"The release of the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for post-2026 Colorado River operations is an important milestone in a complex and consequential process," Gene Shawcroft, the Colorado River Commissioner for Utah, said in a statement to FOX 13 News on Friday.

"The Authority looks forward to carefully reviewing the draft and continuing to work with our Basin State partners, water users, Tribes, and the Bureau of Reclamation to help ensure future operations protect Utah water users, support the environment, and reflect Utah's priorities. The Authority will take the time necessary to fully evaluate the document before offering detailed comments."

Other states are likely to adopt a similar approach. The tense, closed-door negotiations for the massively important water supply have dragged on for years now. Upper Basin states accuse Lower Basin states of taking too much water, while the Lower Basin has demanded the Upper Basin make more cuts than they've been willing to offer. [All seven states](#)

are dealing with drought, over-allocation of supplies and a horrible hydrology in the forecast.

Still, those involved in the states' discussions tell FOX 13 News that slow, steady progress has been made in discussions over the management of the river. The Trump administration has said it will make a decision on its plan by Oct. 1 after a public comment period.

That is unless the states come up with their own agreement.

In a statement to FOX 13 News, the Great Basin Water Network, an environmental group that has been monitoring the negotiations, said the federal government's proposal could hurt communities particularly in the Lower Basin.

"It is clear federal officials are determined to prop up Lake Powell and limit the pain for the Upper Basin while the Lower Basin bears the brunt. This will not limit Upper Basin States to appropriate more water and more uses. Equity and parity among basins aside, there are conditions where millions of acre feet of use will be curtailed. That is a painful reality in times of scarcity. We will see and feel unprecedented pain in all the proposals within this massive document. Regardless, there is a lot to be desired," said Kyle Roerink, the group's executive director.

The environmental group Living Rivers was even more

critical.

"I see nothing sustainable or resilient about this plan. We are worried about more empty promises not coming to fruition. And that means empty reservoirs. The scenarios that came to be in the past 20 years were regarded as near impossibilities during the development of the current management framework created decades ago," said John Weisheit in a statement. "The draft of this environmental review showcases that there are a lot of possibilities where our communities, ecosystems, and governments face great peril. We need to buckle up and get ready for a wild ride."

Read the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation's draft environmental impact statement here:

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