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'Pain and suffering': What the feds' Lake Powell proposal means for Utah and other Colorado River states

The Bureau of Reclamation released a massive document outlining possibilities for managing Lake Powell and Lake Mead.

SUMMARY: The Bureau of Reclamation released a framework for managing Lake Powell and Lake Mead, proposing voluntary water conservation in the Upper Basin and potential steep water cuts in the Lower Basin. The plan aims to prevent reservoir levels from dropping too low, potentially impacting dam infrastructure and triggering legal challenges. While the framework provides flexibility for a drier future, it may not be sufficient to stabilize storage if drought conditions persist.



(Francisco Kjolseth | The Salt Lake Tribune) A boat makes its way to Bullfrog Marina on Lake Powell as high water marks indicate how much the reservoir has receded on Friday, April 24, 2026.



By Brooke Larsen | Aug. 12, 2026, 6:00 a.m.

After years of analysis and stalled negotiations, the federal government last month finally laid out [its proposal](#) for managing the Colorado River's biggest reservoirs for the next decade.

The Bureau of Reclamation still needs to release its final decision and an operating plan for the next two years. But its [final environmental impact statement](#) provides a framework for how it intends to manage parts of the Colorado River system under its control.

The new plan would mean changes in how much water is stored and released from Lake Powell, voluntary water conservation in Utah and other Upper Basin states, and potentially steep water cuts in the Lower Basin — Arizona, California and Nevada.

Current guidelines for managing the reservoirs expire at the end of this year and Reclamation needs a new plan in place by Oct. 1. Reclamation said its preference was to implement a seven-state consensus deal, but so far states have yet to agree.

How Reclamation and states manage the river system affects 40 million people across seven U.S. states, 30 federally recognized tribes and northern Mexico.

Here's why the latest framework matters and what you need to know:

It still might not be enough in a drying West

The Colorado River Basin has been mired in drought for more than two decades, and research shows that area will likely only get warmer and drier.

The question that really matters is how the new plan operates in a dry world, said Jack Schmidt, senior research scientist at Utah State University's Center for Colorado River Studies.

The document gives Reclamation flexibility to respond to an uncertain, but likely drier, river basin. It doesn't solve all issues, though.

If drought conditions don't improve, Reclamation said in its analysis that "even large and unprecedented reductions may be needed and may not be enough to stabilize storage" at Lake Powell and Lake Mead.



(Francisco Kjolseth | The Salt Lake Tribune) House boats are pictured at Bullfrog Marina on Lake Powell on Saturday, April 25, 2026. Glen Canyon National Recreation Area officials plan to move the marina to the deeper waters in the main channel of the reservoir across from Halls Crossing.

"The scary thing about all of this is that none of this solves the problem if the world keeps getting drier," Schmidt said. "That should be taken as an enormous warning for the desperate need to reduce the impact of a warming planet and the drying of the Colorado River Basin."

What does it mean for Utah?

Reclamation's framework sets a goal of 200,000 acre-feet of voluntary water conservation in Utah and other Upper Basin states — Colorado, New Mexico and Wyoming.

Gene Shawcroft, Utah's Colorado River negotiator, said it will likely take Utah and its upstream neighbors three to five years to conserve that amount.

The voluntary target for the Upper Basin is “moving in the right direction,” said John Berggren, regional policy manager for Western Resource Advocates.

But he also hopes those states conserve more than 200,000 acre-feet. “Every state is going to have to do whatever it can to find every acre-foot if we’re going to make it through some of the hydrologies that we’re going to see in the future,” he said.

Under Reclamation’s proposed framework, Upper Basin states and tribes will have “equal access” to store up to 3 million acre-feet of conserved water in Lake Powell. That stored water can be used for transactions with other Upper Basin users, and tribes would receive credit for their contributions to the pool.



(Francisco Kjolseth | The Salt Lake Tribune) High winds kick up the wake of a rental pontoon boat during a tour of Lake Powell on Sunday, April 26, 2026.

Crystal Tulley-Cordova, a principal hydrologist for the Navajo Nation, said the pool is an “innovative solution” and “opportunity” for her tribe.

Reclamation’s framework does not detail how the process will work, but Tulley-Cordova said tribes and Upper Basin states have started discussing it.



(John Locher | AP) People walk by a formerly sunken boat standing upright into the air with its stern buried in the mud along the shoreline of Lake Mead at the Lake Mead National Recreation Area, Jan. 27, 2023, near Boulder City, Nev. Nearly half of the U.S. West has emerged from drought, but intense water challenges persist, scientists said Tuesday, May 9.

Reclamation only includes voluntary measures in the Upper Basin because the federal government doesn't believe it has the responsibility or authority to force water shortages in the Upper Basin, said Sarah Porter, director of the Kyl Center for Water Policy at Arizona State University.

Upper Basin states have argued that they take "mandatory cuts" each year based on how much water actually flows in the river and its upstream tributaries.

"We get cuts from Mother Nature every year," Shawcroft said.

What about California and other Lower Basin states?

In contrast to Reclamation's limited role in the Upper Basin, the Interior Secretary is considered the "[water master](#)" in the Lower Basin and controls the delivery of Colorado River water to Arizona, California and Nevada from Lake Mead.

“The measures that [the bureau] believes it has the authority to impose could have very dramatic impacts on the Lower Basin,” Porter said.

Cuts could be as large as 3 million acre-feet in those states during dry years, according to the federal government’s framework. That’s almost double what those states have offered to conserve in a [Lower Basin proposal](#) released earlier this year.

Lower Basin shortages would hit Arizona, which is home to 22 of the 30 federally recognized tribes in the Colorado River Basin, particularly hard. During the driest conditions, the state could see its Colorado River allocation cut by as much as 77% under Reclamation’s proposal.

The Arizona Department of Water Resources called the potential cuts “unacceptable” and said “such reductions would devastate Arizona’s water users and its economy.”

The Gila River Indian Community, which holds substantial rights in Arizona, said [in a statement](#) that Reclamation’s proposal “fails to adequately address the federal government’s trust responsibility to tribes in the Basin who are seriously affected by cuts to critical water supplies.”

“The community has forcefully made its case to the federal government throughout this process that it cannot simply take our water without our consent,” the statement said.

Ten of the 11 tribes with unresolved water rights in the basin are also in Arizona, said Cora Tso, senior research fellow at the Kyl Center for Water Policy and member of the Navajo Nation.

“They’re left to wonder what water will be left over for them to negotiate and ultimately bring to their community members, to fulfill the purpose of their reservation, to sustain a permanent homeland,” Tso said.

“We’re talking about getting clean water access to people’s homes,” Tso added, “and making sure that those who are hit hardest with impacts from climate change have the adequate resources to help mitigate those impacts.”

Reclamation prioritizes dam infrastructure

Reclamation’s framework aims to stop water levels at Powell and Mead from dropping so low that it could cause damage to Glen Canyon Dam and Hoover Dam.

“There’s enough room within this framework for Reclamation to ensure that the reservoirs avoid a truly catastrophic outcome,” said Doug Kenney, western water policy program director at Colorado University Boulder’s Getches-Wilkinson Center. “But of course the only tool that they have to do that is to cut off water users, and so there’s

going to be pain and suffering somewhere, and that pain and suffering is primarily aimed at Arizona.



Glen Canyon Dam and high-voltage transmission towers in Page, Arizona, on Tuesday, May 20, 2025. Photo by Trent Nelson/The Salt Lake Tribune

The new framework also reduces possible water releases out of Lake Powell from the current low level release of 6 million acre-feet to 5 million acre-feet to protect Glen Canyon Dam.

“The document makes clear that Reclamation will continue doing everything it takes to prop up Lake Powell, including releasing as much water as they can from Flaming Gorge,” Eric Balken, executive director of the Glen Canyon Institute, told the Tribune.

Reclamation includes the “potential for maximum use of” Colorado River reservoirs upstream of Powell, including Flaming Gorge, to protect dam infrastructure.

Reclamation wants to keep Powell above 3,500 feet. At 3,490, the reservoir hits “minimum power pool,” where the dam can no longer produce hydropower and water must go downstream through lower tubes that weren’t intended for sustained water releases.

Hydropower generated from Glen Canyon Dam, and other dams part of the Colorado River Storage Project, provides electricity to over [50 tribal nations](#). That includes about 42% of the Navajo Tribal Utility Authority's total electric supply, according to the [Congressional Research Service](#).



(Francisco Kjolseth | The Salt Lake Tribune) As the Colorado River continues to downcut, construction of a new North Wash takeout near Hite Crossing brings much needed respite for boaters exiting excursions down Cataract Canyon, Friday, April 24, 2026. With releases as low as 5 million acre-feet out of Powell, downstream deliveries could fall below that “tripwire,” as Colorado River experts call it, and Lower Basin states could sue.

Risk of litigation

Such low releases could trigger what's known as a “compact call” from Lower Basin states.

The century-old [Colorado River Compact](#) says that the Upper Basin States “will not cause the flow of the river at Lee Ferry” — the dividing line between the basins just below Glen Canyon Dam — to fall below an aggregate of 75 million acre-feet over a ten-year period.

“I believe that the Lower Basin states will probably bring a compact call against the Upper Basin unless there’s some kind of agreement in place that preserves their claims,” Porter said.

Lower Basins states are also “very likely to bring a legal challenge to the” record of decision, Porter said. Reclamation is expected to release its final decision in the coming days to weeks. If a lawsuit is brought, it could last for 10 to 20 years, Porter said.



(Trent Nelson | The Salt Lake Tribune) A tour boat at Lees Ferry in Marble Canyon, Ariz., on Tuesday, May 20, 2025.

Where negotiations stand

Reclamation says it’s “committed to preserving the opportunity to implement potential future consensus agreements” among the seven states within the framework it outlines.

Shawcroft said that having a clear sense of Reclamation’s plans may help negotiations among the seven basin states because it shows how the feds intend to operate the reservoirs.

Others say it may nudge states closer to courts than consensus, though.

“I don’t see that it helps at all, unless pushing states to litigation can somehow be interpreted as a help,” Porter said. “I don’t see that it creates a context to create a higher likelihood for an agreement.”

“Certainly, if I were an Upper Basin state, I would feel very affirmed right now,” Porter added. “The Lower Basin states have the opposite interpretation.”

And if the hydrology stays bad, negotiations may not get any easier.

“A system that’s totally reliant upon seven-state unanimous agreement deals doesn’t work very well,” Kenney said, “when the only thing there is to negotiate is how the pain and suffering is going to be distributed.”

Meanwhile, “tribes are still totally a side story,” in Reclamation’s governance of the river system, Kenney said.

Reclamation has consulted with tribes, but the Colorado River Indian Tribes (CRIT) said [in a statement](#) that Reclamation has been sharing documents with states without “co-equal interaction or discourse” with the tribe, despite CRIT holding 23% of Arizona’s Colorado River allocation.

Going forward, Tso said all 30 tribes, the seven states and the federal government should be at the negotiating table together.

This article is published through the Colorado River Collaborative, a solutions journalism initiative supported by the Janet Quinney Lawson Institute for Land, Water, and Air at Utah State University. See all of our stories about how Utahns are impacted by the Colorado River at greatsaltlakenews.org/coloradoriver.

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