

The Salt Lake Tribune

The Colorado River's largest reservoirs are heading toward a 'system crash,' experts warn

The warning comes as seven Western states and the federal government struggle to agree on new rules for managing the shrinking river.

By Brooke Larsen | June 5, 2026, 9:40 a.m. | Updated: 2:22 p.m.

Boulder, Colo. • Colorado River experts and decision makers gathered in Boulder, Colorado, this week to discuss the future of the water supply for 40 million people across the Southwest. At the registration table, a new white paper set the tone for [the conference](#) at the Colorado Law School: "Colorado River Basin Storage Continues Slide Toward System Crash."



Photo caption: (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.

If the Colorado River Basin has another dry year, even if water consumption is at or near historic lows, Lake Powell and Lake Mead will likely drop to levels that could threaten dam infrastructure and downstream deliveries to major southwest cities and agriculture hubs at the start of the 2028 water year, according to the paper co-authored by Colorado River experts.

If next year is more similar to a heavy snow year like 2023, then the nation's two largest reservoirs would recover to an extent, but that cushion would likely only last for about two years, the paper says.

"We're going to have to work harder to save water than we have ever worked before in the 21st century," said Jack Schmidt, one of the paper's co-authors, in an interview before the conference.

The researchers intentionally didn't use the "most extreme" years in their study, Schmidt added. For the dry scenario, they used historic flow data from 2025, the fifth driest year in the 21st century. The wet scenario used 2023 flows, which were the third highest in the past 26 years.

"We're trying to lay out, in the starkest terms, where we're at so that everybody understands the significance of the cuts that lie ahead," Schmidt said. "We cannot go over the cliff."

That "cliff" is dropping below "reasonably accessible storage," which the paper defines as the water above 3,500 feet at Lake Powell and 975 feet at Lake Mead. The Bureau of Reclamation has identified these as critical elevations to protect hydropower production and infrastructure at the dams.

"Maintaining elevation of 3,500 feet is essential for protecting operational reliability," Scott Cameron, acting commissioner of Reclamation, said during a talk Thursday.

Critical elevations at Powell

The [April water forecast](#) showed Lake Powell could drop below 3,500 feet as soon as this summer, but with recent actions from Reclamation, including large releases from Flaming Gorge and reductions in flows out of Glen Canyon Dam, Lake Powell is [now projected](#) to drop below that level in early 2027.

Such "crisis-driven operations" were once rare, Katrina Grantz, Reclamation's deputy director for the Upper Colorado region, said during the conference. Now those are becoming "routine," she added.



Photo caption: (Trent Nelson | The Salt Lake Tribune) Glen Canyon Dam and high-voltage transmission towers in Page, Ariz. on Tuesday, May 20, 2025.

Reclamation has no other tools to prop up Lake Powell by early next year, though, Cameron told The Tribune.

“In terms of things that we could do in the near term, like between December 2026 and March of 2027, there really aren’t too many new and different things,” he said. “We’re basically stuck with using the same two levers that we use this year.”

Reclamation may reduce flows out of Lake Powell below 6 million acre-feet, Cameron said. That’s the lowest release allowed in current agreements, but the agency did outline smaller releases in its draft environmental review for post-2026 operations.

When The Tribune asked if the agency has authority to reduce releases further, Cameron said, “My initial non-lawyerly reaction is yes, but that doesn’t mean we won’t get sued.”

If Lake Powell drops below where it can generate hydropower, Reclamation will no longer send water through the dam’s penstocks and instead solely rely on the river outlet works lower down in the dam.

“We are confident that the river outlet works can be safely utilized below elevation 3,490,” Grantz said. “However, some operational concerns have been raised, and, namely, those are the increased potential for cavitation and sediment scouring.”

At lower water levels, air bubbles can enter the tubes, explode and erode the pipe coating, Grantz explained. That happened in 2023, she said.



Photo caption: (Trent Nelson | The Salt Lake Tribune) Some of the eight generators at Glen Canyon Dam in Page, Ariz., on Tuesday, May 20, 2025.

Also, when just using the river outlet works, rocks and cobbles can build up where water would normally flow out of the penstocks, potentially causing issues for bringing power generation back online, she added.

Reclamation is currently studying these issues, as well as conducting an appraisal study of potential dam modifications.

‘All kind of depressing’

The dire future outlined in the white paper was echoed during the first talk of the conference on Thursday.

Brad Udall, a senior climate and water scientist at Colorado State University, started his presentation with an image of Eeyore, a “Winnie The Pooh” character that he was called during last year’s conference.

“Eeyore is just kind of a bummer to be around, right?” Udall said. “I mean, he’s just permanently depressed for no good reason. I’m depressed, but I actually have good reasons.”

Udall shared what’s making him grim, from a graph of this year’s record early and low snowmelt to a map of March’s off-the-charts temperatures.

“Every [Colorado River Basin] state had the warmest March on record, and simultaneously really dry,” he said. “Interestingly, or disturbingly, we now have areas in the West where the March record high temperatures exceed the April record high temperatures.”

Warming due to climate change will continue to cause persistent drought in the U.S. Southwest, Udall said, citing various studies.



Photo caption: (Francisco Kjolseth | The Salt Lake Tribune) A motor boat navigates the main channel of Lake Powell on Sunday, April 26, 2026, as bathtub rings are indicative of how far the waters levels have fallen since being at full capacity in the early 1980s.

He then brought up what he called “the only chart that matters.” It showed a stark upward trend in greenhouse gas emissions since 1850. Even if emissions were to go to zero tomorrow, temperatures will continue to stay high for hundreds to thousands of years, he said.

“All kind of depressing, right?” he added.

Despite his nickname, though, Udall called himself an optimist.

“We are going to get to redo, like it or not, 100 years of law and policy around how we manage a critical resource, and so we should not waste this opportunity,” he said.

The state of negotiations

The seven U.S. states that share the Colorado River still haven’t reached an agreement on how to manage the river system after current operating guidelines for dry times expire at the end of this year.

“As hydrology worsens, consensus is harder to come by,” said Becky Mitchell, Colorado’s negotiator, during a panel at the conference Friday morning.

Reclamation and the basin states have been in “continuous discussions to develop a consensus-based proposal,” Cameron said. “We’ve tried to understand where the seven states are coming from. We have tried to figure out what compromise solutions might be.”

That has included three proposals that Reclamation thought all states would like. “Turns out we were wrong,” he said.

Lower Basin states — Arizona, California and Nevada — released a proposal on May 1 that provides a pathway forward through 2028, including 3.2 million acre-feet of water savings in the Lower Basin.

“There’s a reasonable, rational operating plan for the next two plus years right in front of our face, and we should take that,” John Entsminger, Nevada’s negotiator, said during a panel discussion on Friday.

Reclamation must have new operating guidelines in place for Powell by October 1, though. The agency plans to release a final environmental impact statement in mid-summer with its preferred path for operating the river system for the next 10 years, Cameron said.

“If peace breaks out and we have a seven-state agreement on something a year and a half from now, or four and a half years from now,” he added, “we’re happy to take that agreement and have it supplant this 10-year framework.”

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.