

With Upper, Lower basin states still snagged, feds give them more time to craft Colorado River plan

[Jeniffer Solis](#)

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Nevada and six other Colorado River states failed to reach a broad agreement Tuesday on how to share the river's dwindling water supply, missing a federally-imposed

deadline after days of intense closed-door negotiations.

Despite missing the deadline, the Department of the Interior and the Bureau of Reclamation indicated states would be given additional time to continue negotiations after making "collective progress."

"While more work needs to be done, collective progress has been made that warrants continued efforts to define and approve details for a finalized agreement," said a joint statement from the seven states, the Interior Department and the Bureau of Reclamation.

The Bureau of Reclamation – which manages water in the West under the Interior Department – initially gave states until Nov. 11 to submit a preliminary agreement for a plan that could replace the river's operating guidelines set to expire at the end of 2026.

The initial timeline also called for states to share a final consensus-based plan by mid-February 2026 in order to reach a final agreement in the summer of 2026 with implementation of the new guidelines beginning in October 2026.

Secretary of the Interior Doug Burgum previously indicated that the federal government would intervene in the Colorado River water negotiations if the seven basin states couldn't

reach their own agreement.

The Department of the Interior did not respond to questions about a new deadline after states missed Tuesday's or whether the agency would intervene.

Representatives from the Lower Basin states — Nevada, Arizona, and California — and Upper Basin states — Colorado, New Mexico, Utah, and Wyoming — attempted to hammer out an agreement over a two-day meeting in Phoenix but could not reach a deal to manage the drought-stricken river.

In a joint statement the seven states and federal water managers said they "recognize the serious and ongoing challenges facing the Colorado River."

Prolonged drought driven by climate change has put immense pressure on the overtapped Colorado River which sustains agriculture in the West and provides water for 40 million people across seven U.S. states, 30 Native American tribes and parts of northern Mexico.

"Through continued cooperation and coordinated action, there is a shared commitment to ensuring the long-term sustainability and resilience of the Colorado River system," the joint statement said.

State negotiators for both the Upper and Lower Basin have

said they would prefer a seven-state agreement than the alternative river management options proposed by the federal government last year.

Utah Gov. Spencer Cox said he believes there is still a path to a seven-state consensus, despite states failure to meet the federal deadline Tuesday.

“While the Basin States did not finalize an agreement today on post-2026 Colorado River operations, our commitment to a state-led path remains,” Cox said [Tuesday afternoon](#) on the social media site X.

One of the biggest disagreements between the Upper and Lower Basin states is over which faction should have to cut back on their water use, and by how much.

The Lower Basin – Nevada, Arizona, and California – want all seven Colorado River states to share mandatory water cuts during dry years under the new guidelines. The Upper Basin, which is not subject to mandatory cuts under the current guidelines, say they already use much less water than downstream states and should not face additional cuts during shortages.

That disagreement prompted lawmakers in Arizona on Tuesday to call for stronger federal intervention in shaping post-2026 Colorado River operating guidelines.

In a letter to Interior Secretary Burgum on Tuesday, Arizona Gov. Katie Hobbs and legislative leaders asked the federal government to include water supply reductions for Upper Basin states in any new guidelines they consider.

“This extreme negotiating posture – four of the seven Basin States refusing to participate in any sharing of water shortages – has led to a fundamental impasse that is preventing the successful development of a 7-State consensus plan for management of the Colorado River,” [wrote Hobbs in the letter](#).

Lower Basin states have offered to [conserve 1.5 million acre-feet](#) of Colorado River water each year under post-2026 operating guidelines on the condition that Upper Basin states share cuts if further reductions are needed during dry years. Arizona would bear the brunt of those reductions.

“The existing Colorado River operating guidelines are near expiration, and a meager runoff season has left the reservoirs depleted once again and one bad winter away from reaching critical lows,” reads the Arizona letter.

‘Rip off the Band Aid’

The Bureau of Reclamation will still need to go through the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process so they can assess the environmental impact of the plan before

issuing a final decision on new guidelines for the river's management.

The agency plans to release draft post-2026 operating guidelines in December detailing options for how to manage the Colorado River, followed by an open public comment period.

After two years of state negotiations, some conservation groups also urged the Bureau of Reclamation to move on to the public NEPA process without a state consensus plan.

"Rip off the Band Aid, and let the public get to work. The states don't deserve the kid-glove treatment any longer," said Kyle Roerink, the executive director of the Great Basin Water Network.

John Weisheit, the conservation director of Living Rivers, echoed calls for the federal government to step up.

"It is clear that negotiators cannot hash out a meaningful management regime to deal with the dwindling reservoir levels that we will likely see in the coming years," Weisheit said. "The federal government's deference to the states has got to stop."