

**Statement of Andrea Travnicek,
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U.S. Department of the Interior
Before the
Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources**

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Chairman Lee, Ranking Member Heinrich, and Members of the Committee, I am Andrea Travnicek, Assistant Secretary for Water and Science at the U.S. Department of the Interior (Department). Thank you for the opportunity to provide an update on drought in the Colorado River Basin, the actions that the Department has taken to address it this year, and the Department's long-term plan to operate and protect the Colorado River system moving forward.

Overview

The Colorado River Basin is in the 27th year of an historic drought. Both Lake Powell and Lake Mead, the two largest reservoirs in the United States, are approaching historically low levels with Powell at 25 percent and Mead at 29 percent of capacity. Long-term drought has reduced Colorado River system storage to about 34 percent of capacity. The Colorado River Basin has been historically dry in 2026, with one of the lowest inflows into Lake Powell on record at 800,000 acre-feet, or 15 percent of normal forecasted between April and July 2026, creating operational challenges for the Bureau of Reclamation (Reclamation) to keep water levels above critical elevations. The combination of the lowest snowpack on record and record-breaking March and April heat has further intensified drought conditions, elevating the risk to essential water and power infrastructure.

In April, the Department took two actions, to release from 660,000 up to 1 million-acre-feet (MAF) of additional water from Flaming Gorge Dam through April 2027 and to reduce releases from Glen Canyon Dam by 1.48 MAF through September to a 6 MAF release. Collectively, this is expected to raise Lake Powell's elevation by approximately 54 feet to at least elevation 3,500 by April 2027 to reduce potential impacts on water deliveries, safeguard critical infrastructure, and preserve operational flexibility.

These operational challenges also come as existing agreements that guided the operations of the Colorado River for the last two decades are set to expire at the end of the year. These include the 2007 Colorado River Interim Guidelines for Lower Basin Shortages and Coordinated Operations for Lake Powell and Lake Mead (2007 guidelines), the 2019 Drought Contingency Plan (DCP).

Administration Approach

The Trump Administration has been heavily engaged over the last 14 months to develop a consensus-based proposal for post-2026 operations – facilitating discussion, making recommendations, offering proposals, and pressing each of the Basin States – while establishing deadlines to allow enough time for consensus proposals to be incorporated into the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process. Secretary Burgum has met twice with the governors

over the last year to try to reach a consensus agreement. However, despite these efforts, no seven-state consensus proposal has emerged yet.

In January, the Department published a Draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for post-2026 operations. The five alternatives provide extensive NEPA coverage and provide the Department – and the seven states – with broad flexibility to find a Preferred Alternative. Although we continue to believe a seven-state consensus approach provides the most durable and least litigious foundation for future operations, we are rapidly approaching the new water year on October 1 and environmental compliance and agreements amongst water users need to be put in place. Since the close of the Draft EIS comment period, the Department has been reviewing responses, updating the analysis, and developing the Preliminary Preferred Alternative. Our continued focus is on protecting the system and ensuring the long-term sustainability of the Colorado River Basin.

The Department’s proposed approach is to create a 10-year framework that allows for operational guidelines to be issued at regular intervals to balance the Basin’s need for certainty, reliability, and stability under current conditions and absent a consensus proposal. This approach establishes longer term principles and sideboards that will be used to guide the development of the operational guidelines and that would not change throughout the 10-year term, providing more certainty for water users while allowing flexibility to adjust to hydrologic conditions.

The Preferred Alternative will adopt operations that are responsive to hydrology by managing the system conservatively during low inflow conditions and transitioning to a recovery posture as and when conditions improve to stabilize the system and ensure a more resilient, adaptive operating regime. This will allow for the incorporation of consensus recommendations. Over the last month, we have sought feedback from and are working with Basin partners to incorporate recommendations to the 2027 and 2028 operational guidelines. Based on the feedback provided by each Basin, the Department has responded and provided adjustments for discussion for Colorado River operations in 2027-2028.

The Department will continue to work with both the Upper and Lower Basin as well as hold consultations with Tribes and meetings with other stakeholders to incorporate feedback and work towards finalization in the upcoming weeks. We remain committed to establishing operating guidelines that will provide certainty, reliability and stability under current conditions and absent a consensus proposal. Moving forward, we will continue to engage with the Basin States in an effort to reach a seven-state consensus that can be incorporated into or replace the framework in the coming years. For long-term post-2026 operations of the Colorado River system, the target is publication of the Final Environmental Impact Statement this summer and adoption of a Record of Decision shortly thereafter. The Department intends to establish operating guidelines that will protect the Colorado River System in accordance with the historical record of laws, regulations, and agreements established over the last century, and we recognize the very real impact that these guidelines will have on users throughout the Basin. We will continue to seek feedback from stakeholders and tribes to better understand how our Preliminary Preferred Alternative will impact them and seek any better methods to address them.

If consensus is not reached, Reclamation is able to act pursuant to several authorities including, but not limited to, the Colorado River Storage Project Act of 1956 to operate the Upper Initial Units, the 1968 Colorado River Basin Project Act and subsequent long-range operating criteria based on a 1970 rule-making process, the 1928 Boulder Canyon Project Act that among other things establishes the Secretary of Interior's water master role for the lower Colorado River, and the 1964 Supreme Court decree in *Arizona v. California*, as consolidated in 2006, which addresses shortage, normal, and surplus condition determinations in the Lower Basin. Reclamation would also rely on authorities provided in its founding act of 1902.

Conclusion

Managing the Colorado River requires working together to identify opportunities to address the real water shortage in the basin while still respecting existing water rights. Over the last five years, the seven Basin States have received over \$9 billion dollars in supplemental funding, including millions of dollars that this Administration recently approved to support water conservation in the Basin and facilitate a seven-state consensus, in addition to the hundreds of millions of dollars a year of annual appropriations that are provided within the Basin. The Department recognizes the need to further mitigate drought conditions and appreciates the additional project proposals submitted by each of the States in recent weeks. We look forward to working with the Basin States and Congress to evaluate these projects. The Trump Administration is committed to the Colorado River Basin as we work with our state and tribal partners to address critical challenges faced by the 40 million people who call the Basin home.

Thank you for the opportunity to be here today and I am happy to answer your questions.