

## New partnership formed to address drought in Colorado River Basin

*Unlikely partners along Upper Colorado River Basin collaborate to develop new strategies*

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In a first-of-its-kind partnership, agricultural and environmental organizations, West Slope water districts and Denver Water have come together to explore measures that could help benefit the Colorado River and avoid reaching critically low water levels in Lake Powell. Should levels in this important reservoir continue to decline due to the prolonged drought in the basin, it could result in a compact call, putting water supplies to much of Colorado and the upper basin states at risk. This also could result in a loss of regionally important hydropower production, a reduction in revenues derived from the sale of this power, and an associated loss of funding for important programs like the Upper Colorado River Endangered Fish Recovery Program that provides the means by which all existing water use and an increment of future use in the upper basin can comply with the federal Endangered Species Act.

The Colorado Cattlemen's Association, Colorado Farm Bureau, Colorado River District, Southwestern Water Conservation District, Denver Water, The Nature Conservancy and Trout Unlimited are working together to leverage \$11 million made available under the [Colorado River System Conservation Program](#), which will fund pilot projects to reduce demands in the Colorado River Basin and improve reservoir levels in Lake Powell as well as Lake Mead, which also has declined to its lowest level in its 80 year history.

"Without collaborative action, water supplies, hydropower production, water quality, agricultural output, recreation and environmental resources are all at risk in the next several years in the upper basin, if Lake Powell reaches critically low levels," said Doug Robotham, Colorado water project director of The Nature Conservancy in Colorado.

The Colorado River System Conservation Program, announced last week, was created by the Bureau of Reclamation and four municipalities in the upper and lower Colorado basins, including Denver Water, to provide funding to develop, test and gather data on potential short-term demonstration or pilot programs that keep water in lakes Powell and Mead through temporary, voluntary and fully compensated mechanisms. If a pilot program proves to be successful, it could be part of a contingency toolbox developed by states and the federal government to be implemented only if a severe shortage looks imminent and discontinued when conditions improve.

"Our interest is to protect water users in Colorado and the upper basin. We know that if there is a compact call, agriculture is the first area that will be looked at for the solution," said Don Shawcroft, Colorado Farm Bureau. "A crisis is bad for everyone — especially agriculture. It is vital that we have a voice at the table."

The upper basin pilot projects developed under the System Conservation Program will be used to demonstrate ways to put water immediately in Lake Powell, through voluntary, compensated means, and only for as long as a drought continues.

"Lake Powell is the 'bank account' that assures the upper basin has the wherewithal to meet our obligation to the lower basin under the Colorado River Compact. While the risks of Lake Powell going below its power pool are low, the consequences are high," said Jim Lochhead, CEO/manager of Denver Water. "Currently there are no contingency plans for such an event. Denver gets half its water supply from the Colorado River so we have a big

stake in the future security of the river, not just for ourselves, but for all water users in Colorado. As leaders, we simply cannot wait for a crisis to happen before we come together to figure out how to address it. That would be irresponsible.”

“For a number of years now we have been working with Colorado, Front Range water providers, Southwestern, TNC, and agricultural producers on a long-term water banking solution. The System Conservation Program is a natural outgrowth of that effort. The challenge is to be sure all parties are represented and that we have fair and transparent processes,” said Eric Kuhn, general manager of the Colorado River District.

In order to ensure that local concerns are addressed, and that there is equity and fairness among all parties, the upper basin states of Colorado, New Mexico, Utah and Wyoming, and the Upper Colorado River Commission will have a direct role in program efforts. This envisioned structure is distinct from that of the Lower Colorado River Basin, where the Bureau of Reclamation will manage conservation actions in Arizona, California and Nevada to address declining reservoir levels in Lake Mead in a manner consistent with past programs.

“Complying with the Colorado River Compact is a shared responsibility across all water-use sectors and among all the upper basin states” said James Eklund, director of the Colorado Water Conservation Board. “We must control our destiny. The worst case is a compact call or a situation where the federal government determines how we will manage critical flows. We simply must work together to protect the future of this state, all our economies and critical industries to avoid a future compact call.”

As this is a basin-wide project, the coalition will continue to seek additional stakeholders throughout the upper basin states. The members also plan to actively seek additional funding for education and outreach.

“This is not a one-sector or one-state solution. The pilot programs will demonstrate the viability of cooperative means to reduce water demand from any number of different sources where water is lost or consumed — agriculture, municipal and industrial,” said Frank Daley, president of the Colorado Cattlemen’s Association.

“We have learned in Colorado through our Water Conservation Board and Basin Roundtables how critical public awareness is to project success. Education and awareness of the pilot projects may be equally as beneficial as the projects themselves. We have to be sure people have the real facts of what we are trying to do, buy in to the process and then document the benefits,” stated Bruce Whitehead, executive director of the Southwestern Conservation District.

The Colorado River and its tributaries provide water to nearly 40 million people for municipal use, and the combined metropolitan areas served by the Colorado River represent the world’s 12th largest economy, generating more than \$1.7 trillion in Gross Metropolitan Product per year along with agricultural economic benefits of just under \$5 billion annually.

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