



# Western States Water

## Addressing Water Needs and Strategies for a Sustainable Future

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### **WESTERN GOVERNORS/WATER RESOURCES** **Drought**

On August 15, ten western governors wrote President Joe Biden requesting he declare a Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) drought disaster, as provided under the Stafford Act, allowing access to additional federal resources to “help protect America’s family farmers, ranchers, and fishers” weather the “twin challenges of our extreme drought and catastrophic wildfires.” While continuing to do “what is within our power, including working with our state legislatures and local governments to mitigate the immediate impacts of the drought, ...the situation is now beyond our capacity as states or a region to manage without additional federal assistance.” The governors provided recommendations for immediate additional assistance the federal government can provide.

The letter was signed by Governors Kate Brown (D-OR), Doug Burgum (R-ND), Spencer Cox (R-UT), Greg Gianforte (R-MT), Michelle Lujan Grisham (D-NM), Jay Inslee (D-WA), Brad Little (R-ID), Jared Polis (D-CO), Gavin Newsom (D-CA), and Steve Sisolak (D-NV). It addressed the current crisis stating: “Thousands of farmers in our states are experiencing devastating impacts from our ongoing drought.... Hay prices have skyrocketed, ranchers are selling off their livestock and others are considering selling prime agricultural lands for development. At this point there is little to no animal feed across much of the West, requiring farmers to import feed from out of state. Without substantial assistance, rural economies in our states that rely heavily on agriculture and natural resources will take years to recover from the effects of this devastating drought.” The letter expressed appreciation for the funding available from the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA’s) Farm Service Agency (FSA) and other sources, but notes local FSA offices are “overburdened with requests and unable to help on the scale we need.”

The letter continued: “Beyond the impact on those industries and communities, the drought will have serious downstream impacts on the security of our food, fiber and energy production, both regionally and nationally. Those impacts include low or dried up reservoirs, increased algal blooms, a decrease in hydroelectric

power and the potential of shuttering hydroelectric dams because of low water levels. Some drought-impacted communities are already running out of drinking water, a situation that could become much more widespread with prolonged drought. Additional impacts are being felt by local economies reliant on the recreational economies developed around large reservoirs in our states. These economies have already suffered lost revenues due to the COVID-19 pandemic and are now being devastated below water levels that preclude access and recreation on these waters.”

The governors noted, “The latest U.S. Drought Monitor report indicates 99% of the West is in a declared drought compared with 63% this time one year ago. Focusing on the top two intensity ratings (D3-D4), nearly 60% of the West is experiencing extreme or exceptional drought conditions. One year ago, the percent of the area in D3-D4 was less than 2.5%. Historic drought levels threaten to eliminate entire crops, depress yields and harbor extreme levels of pests and disease that add to the cumulative loss. It is estimated 59.2 million Americans live in drought areas. These historic dry conditions have been exacerbated and accelerated by recent record-setting temperatures throughout the region. The National Weather Service recently reported that 67 weather stations in the West recorded their hottest temperatures ever. With temperatures reaching over 40 degrees above seasonal averages, agriculture commodities sustained a significant loss. As harvest continues and impacts are realized, the rapid evaporation of what little moisture was present and the exposure to intense heat and sun has devastated entire types of commodities.”

The letter addressed wildfires that continue to grow in number and intensity, stating, “...wildfires’ direct and indirect impacts act as a force multiplier in the severity of hardships agriculture producers are experiencing. The heroic efforts of our wildland firefighters protect lives and property from devastation, but their capacity to mitigate all threats is limited.... Drought and wildfire impacts are also being felt by our wildlife resources. Species are not only being displaced by fire but are also suffering from limited water for survival. These impacts could have long term effects on species population numbers and their status under the Endangered Species Act. As you know,

listing under the Act can have broad economic and social impacts that are significant to local rural economies.”

The governors emphasized, “We are eager to have additional conversations with you and your Administration about longer term strategies to make the West more resilient to drought, wildfires and climate change. However, at this time we are requesting that you immediately declare a FEMA drought disaster in our states, allowing our agriculture communities to access funding beyond what is available through existing emergency programs. We recognize that using FEMA funding for a drought is not common, but the Stafford Act specifically references drought as an eligible category of disaster.”

Further, the governors asked that the Secretaries of Agriculture and Interior “evaluate grazing grounds and livestock feed opportunities that could be made available for emergency situations where lands can support the additional use. The drought and pest pressures have forced livestock ranchers and producers to relocate herds, open winter grazing grounds or reduce herd sizes due to the lack of available forage and feed. While USDA has utilized Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) lands, as livestock producers experience prolonged drought conditions and the residual impacts, these lands will exhaust their capacity.”

The governors’ expressed their gratitude and concluded, “We encourage the White House to consider and work with Congressional leadership for emergency assistance, including the possibility of allowing states to utilize existing American Rescue Plan funds for drought- and fire-related needs. To this end, we look forward to working closely with your Administration to discuss agency-specific actions and opportunities to leverage all federal and state resources to respond to the immediate impacts of natural disasters.”

## **ADMINISTRATION/WATER RESOURCES** **Bureau of Reclamation/Colorado River/Drought**

On August 16, the Bureau of Reclamation (USBR) announced the 2022 operating conditions for Lake Powell and Lake Mead. The August 24-month study projects that Lake Powell’s January 2022 elevation will be 3,535.40 feet, and will operate in the Mid-Elevation Release Tier (releasing 7.48 million acre-feet) in water year 2022 (October 1, 2021 through September 30, 2022), with the potential for a mid-year adjustment in April 2022.

In July 2021, drought operations to protect Lake Powell were implemented under the Upper Basin Drought Response Operations Agreement releasing up to an additional 181,000-acre feet of water from upstream units of the Colorado River Storage Project to Lake Powell.

Lake Mead is projected to reach elevation 1,065.85 feet, about nine feet below the Lower Basin shortage determination trigger of 1,075 feet, and about 24 feet below the drought contingency plan trigger of 1,090 feet. Lake Mead will operate in its first-ever Level 1 Shortage Condition in calendar year 2022 (January 1, 2022 through December 31, 2022). The required shortage reductions include: (1) 512,000 acre-feet for Arizona (18%); (2) 21,000 acre-feet for Nevada (7%); and (3) 80,000 acre-feet for Mexico (5%).

The Upper Basin experienced an exceptionally dry spring in 2021, with April to July runoff into Lake Powell totaling just 26% of average despite near-average snowfall last winter. Total Colorado River system storage today is 40% of capacity, down from 49% at this time last year.

Assistant Secretary for Water and Science Tanya Trujillo said: “Like much of the West, and across our connected basins, the Colorado River is facing unprecedented and accelerating challenges. The only way to address these challenges and climate change is to utilize the best available science and to work cooperatively across the landscapes and communities that rely on the Colorado River. That is precisely the focus of the White House Interagency Drought Working Group – a multi-agency partnership created to collaborate with States, Tribes, farmers and communities impacted by drought and climate change to build and enhance regional resilience.”

USBR Deputy Commissioner Camille Touton said: “Today’s announcement of a Level 1 Shortage Condition at Lake Mead underscores the value of the collaborative agreements we have in place with the seven basin states, Tribes, water users and Mexico in the management of water in the Colorado River Basin. While these agreements and actions have reduced the risk, we have not eliminated the potential for continued decline of these critically important reservoirs. Reclamation is committed to working with all of our partners in the basin and with Mexico in continuing to implement these agreements and the ongoing work ahead.”  
<https://www.usbr.gov/newsroom/##/news-release/3950>

## **PEOPLE**

On August 17, Governor Gregg Abbott appointed **Brooke Paup**, Chairwoman, Texas Water Development Board to the WSWC. A Board member since 2018, she has also served in the office of the Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts, as Director of Legislative Affairs, and as a special assistant for policy and research for the Office of the Attorney General, where she was also Deputy Division Chief of Intergovernmental Relations. We congratulate Brooke on her appointment and look forward to working with her.

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**The WESTERN STATES WATER COUNCIL is a government entity of representatives appointed by the Governors of Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Kansas, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Oregon, South Dakota, Texas, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming.**