

On October 6, the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Subcommittee on Water and Power held a hearing to examine the status and management of drought in the western United States. Witnesses included: Tanya Trujillo, Assistant Secretary for Water and Science, U.S. Department of the Interior; Tom Buschatzke, Director, Arizona Department of Water Resources; Julie Schaff Ellingson, Executive Vice President, North Dakota Stockmen's Association; and Jennifer Pitt, Colorado River Program Director, National Audubon Society.

Trujillo provided an overview of current reservoir conditions, with 93% of the western United States in drought or abnormally dry conditions. "In California and in the Colorado River Basin, certain reservoirs have reached 30-year storage lows, and Lake Powell and Lake Mead – the two largest reservoirs in the United States – are currently at historically low levels. Although the Rio Grande and Pecos basins and parts of Arizona received some monsoonal rainfall this summer, the temporary relief has not reversed the more than two-decade drought impacting the region, with Elephant Butte Reservoir, for example, currently at only 5 percent of its total capacity. Collectively, a very challenging water supply situation is unfolding in much of the West.... Colorado River system reservoirs sit at just 39 percent, the lowest levels since they began to fill. Over the 22-year drought period in the Colorado Basin, combined hydropower generation has declined 13 percent to an annual average of 10.5 million [megawatt hours] MWh. Declining storage levels due to ongoing drought have resulted in reduced hydropower generation efficiency and concerns about approaching minimum power pool at Glen Canyon Dam, below which no power can be produced."

Trujillo discussed the implications of the first shortage declaration in the Lower Colorado River Basin. "NOAA's Climate Prediction Center recently forecasted an increased likelihood of a La Nina Winter this year and the continuation of high temperatures and below-average precipitation reaching into December 2022. Many of Reclamation's projects will begin the 2022 water year with below-average carryover water storage. We have had to make difficult choices this year, and together we will have to make more difficult decisions if it continues to remain dry next year."

She talked about interagency coordination to "marshal existing resources and work in partnership with state, local, and Tribal governments to address the needs of communities suffering from drought-related impacts; identify and disburse immediate financial and technical assistance, and develop longer-term measures to respond to climate change, including building more resilient communities and protecting the natural environment." She offered a timeline of 227 projects funded with \$73.2M in WaterSMART grants across the western states, as well as other investments made by Interior and the Department of Agriculture over the summer of 2021.

She concluded: "No amount of funding can offset the severe shortfalls in precipitation being experienced this year across the American West. We will experience unavoidable reductions in farm water supplies and hydropower generation, ecosystem degradation, and urban areas will need to conserve water. The Department and state and local partners have planned for this by being proactive and fully using the tools we have. We appreciate Congress' attention to the severity of drought and welcome your input on new tools and approaches to help the communities we all serve."

Buschatzke talked about groundwater storage and management, wastewater reuse, desalination, augmentation and artificial recharge, water exchanges and leveraging water infrastructure, forest and watershed health and the dangers of wildfires, efforts to protect water levels in Lake Mead under the Drought Contingency Plan (DCP), and funding from various sources and collaboration to stretch water supplies. He said: "Arizona and the other western states face serious challenges as we grapple with drought and the anticipated hotter and drier future attendant to climate change. Meeting those challenges requires vigilance in monitoring the hydrologic conditions, watershed health and reservoir contents to create programs and implement actions that not only respond to those conditions but reduce the likelihood that more onerous water supply reductions will occur. Arizona has a history of meeting challenges both on its own and in concert with other water users in the Colorado River Basin and Mexico. Arizona recognizes that it cannot be successful solely on its own, particularly given the challenges we face today. Collaboration with the Basin States and Mexico is the only realistic pathway to achieve success. Likewise, the water users, Tribes and other stakeholders throughout the Basin must be engaged and provide input into actions to protect the Colorado River System. Arizona has embraced that philosophy in the creation of the DCP, the 1030' [Lake Mead elevation triggering] consultation and post-2026 discussions."

He added: "Partnering with the Department of the Interior and the Bureau of Reclamation is also a crucial factor in managing the current conditions of the Colorado River and will be key in managing our future. Reclamation's data and modeling capabilities represent the best available science in providing a baseline for hydrologic conditions and projections to inform decision-making for future actions. Interior and Reclamation have other key resources that can be deployed to enhance the sustainability of the Colorado River system. Moving forward, transparency and inclusiveness are imperative. Arizona benefited by following those tenets in the creation of its DCP Implementation Plan that set the stage for approval of the Seven Basin States' DCP Agreements. Arizona is following those tenets as it continues its internal discussion and as it works with the Basin States, Mexico, the United States and stakeholders on the Colorado River."