



# Western States Water

## Addressing Water Needs and Strategies for a Sustainable Future

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### **ADMINISTRATION/WATER RESOURCES** **Department of the Interior/Colorado River**

On October 12, the Department of the Interior (DOI) announced a new Lower Colorado River Basin System Conservation and Efficiency Program to help prevent depletions from the Colorado River. The Inflation Reduction Act (H.R. 5376) included \$4B for the water management and drought mitigation program, which will be managed by the Bureau of Reclamation (USBR).

There are three program components for applicants to submit proposals for conservation, with the first two available in October to November, and the third allowing proposals to be submitted in 2023. The first component accepts proposals for conservation that result in wet water remaining in Lake Mead at set prices: (1) \$330 per acre-foot for one-year agreements; (2) \$365 per acre-foot for two-year agreements; and (3) \$400 per acre-foot for three-year agreements. The second component accepts proposals for projects at a variety of pricing options. The third component accepts proposals for long-term improvements for multi-year conservation.

DOI Secretary Deb Haaland said: "The prolonged drought afflicting the West is one of the most significant challenges facing our country. I have seen firsthand how climate change is exacerbating the drought crisis and putting pressure on the communities who live across Western landscapes. Thanks to historic funding from the Inflation Reduction Act, the Interior Department is committed to using every resource available to conserve water and ensure that irrigators, Tribes and adjoining communities receive adequate assistance and support to build resilient communities and protect our water supplies."

USBR Commissioner Camille Calimlim Touton said: "This significant investment from the Inflation Reduction Act enables the Bureau of Reclamation to improve water management and conservation efforts in the Colorado River Basin today - and for the future. The Lower Colorado River Basin System Conservation and Efficiency Program provides both new opportunities for system conservation and more durable long-term solutions for areas experiencing drought." See <https://www.usbr.gov/>

### **CONGRESS** **House/Farm Bill 2023**

On September 20, the House Agriculture Subcommittee on Conservation and Forestry held a hearing on stakeholder perspectives of Title II Conservation programs in the Farm Bill. Witnesses included Michael Crowder, National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD); Nicole Berg, National Association of Wheat Growers; Lori Feath, Land Trust Alliance; and Shayne Wiese, Iowa Cattlemen's Association and National Cattlemen's Beef Association.

Crowder noted that NACD established a Farm Bill Task Force to develop policy and to comprehensively review the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) conservation programs. He emphasized the need for greater flexibility to adapt to local needs, as "America's vast private lands differ greatly in respect to the natural resources, production systems, and environmental conditions." He called the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) the most locally adaptable working lands program, and cautioned Congress about considering any changes that would make the program less flexible. He encouraged Congress to evaluate the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) to ensure that this critical conservation tool properly fits into a modern-day conservation title, particularly when it comes to including prime farmland in the program.

Crowder said: "While NACD does not support removing existing CRP acres, we must ensure that the focus of the program continues to be enrolling only the most environmentally sensitive land and buffers that facilitate continued agriculture production on adjacent farmland." He noted that the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) has been found to be complicated and cumbersome from both a producer and administrator perspective, and recommended simplifying the application process. Similarly, while the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) has increased conservation opportunities and enabled leveraging of non-federal resources, the program needs to be simplified and streamlined so that projects don't take as long to "break ground."

Berg said: "Reviewing wheat growers' use of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) delivered programs over the last few years, we found that wheat growers predominantly use the EQIP and CSP, with a few growers working through RCPP projects. Between 2018 and 2021, wheat farmers entered over 7500 contracts with NRCS through these conservation programs. Looking at the use of these programs across all states several of the top conservation practices wheat growers are adopting through the programs include cover crops, pest management, nutrient management, tillage management, terraces and grassed waterways. The flexibility and local decision making included in the Farm Bill conservation programs is vital to their success."

Berg noted that the programs are also becoming increasingly complex, and additional outreach and education on program changes and opportunities are needed. She noted the significant environmental and natural resource benefits of the programs, including improving water quality and quantity.

Feath made several recommendations regarding the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP), including better coordination with the RCPP and the creation of a similar Forest Conservation Easement Program.

Wiese said: "Recently, I applied to receive EQIP cost-sharing funding for a water infrastructure project on my operation. After months of waiting with no approval, I finally gave up and completed the project without assistance from USDA. I see many other opportunities on our ranch to improve the land and environment with EQIP funding but simply do not have the confidence in the process to apply again. We could improve upon soil-health-building grazing practices, provide more erosion control, and promote cleaner water resources. I would rather budget responsibly and pay for it ourselves to help the ranch be environmentally progressive than wait for assistance and lose valuable time. I am not alone in this. Ranchers care about the environment and their livestock, and any improvement on the land is something we are enormously proud of. By creating additional hurdles for producers that want to utilize these programs, the committee and USDA limit access to these programs while simultaneously limiting the government's ability to record our environmental progress." He also noted the importance of flexibility and technical assistance to accomplish projects.

## **WATER RESOURCES** **California/Colorado River**

On October 5, the Colorado River Board of California sent a letter to the Department of the Interior and Bureau of Reclamation, offering to voluntarily reduce water use

with financial assistance from the Inflation Reduction Act and other federal programs.

The letter states: "California water agencies that utilize Colorado River water supplies propose to conserve up to an additional 400,000 acre-feet of water in Lake Mead each year, beginning in 2023 and running through 2026. This water, which would otherwise be used by California's communities and farms, will meaningfully contribute to stabilizing the Colorado River reservoir system.

"We have identified a collection of proposed water conservation and water use reduction opportunities that would yield approximately 400,000 acre-feet of System Conservation water supplies that could be retained in Lake Mead each year through 2026. California's Colorado River water agencies are also prepared to create and store additional quantities of Intentionally Created Surplus water supplies in Lake Mead pursuant to the 2007 Interim Shortage Guidelines, under future favorable hydrologic and water supply conditions.

"In order to enable this water conservation, our agencies will need to utilize funding opportunities provided by the Inflation Reduction Act and other federal programs. Each of the California agencies involved in developing this package of proposed conserved water supplies will also require your support in developing agreements for funding, potential intra- and interstate coordination, water use accounting, and in obtaining necessary board and agency approvals over the coming weeks and months.

"The State of California and its Colorado River agencies appreciate the collaboration of the Department of the Interior and Reclamation to stabilize the Salton Sea, which has been shrinking due to California's existing water conservation actions and will further shrink when additional conservation actions are taken. Voluntary water conservation actions outlined in this letter depends on a clear federal commitment to contribute meaningfully to stabilization efforts at the Salton Sea." See <https://resources.ca.gov/Newsroom/Page-Content/News-List/California-Water-Agencies-Pl-edge-to-Conserve-Additional-Water>.

## **MEETINGS**

The WSWC Fall (200th) Meetings will be held in Sulphur, Oklahoma on October 19-21, at the Artesian Hotel, Casino and Spa. There is no registration fee to attend the meetings, but we are asking all individuals, regardless of in person or virtual attendance to please register in advance. For further information, please see <https://westernstateswater.org/events/2022-wswc-fall-200th-meetings/>.

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