

**WATER RESOURCES**  
**Colorado River**July 7, 2025  
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On June 26, the Upper Colorado River Commission (UCRC) held its 312th Regular meeting in Salt Lake City and discussed worsening hydrologic forecasts and declining reservoir levels that mirror the near-crisis conditions of 2021–2022. The Commissioners from Colorado, New Mexico, Utah and Wyoming reiterated their focus on “supply-based” river management, collaborative problem solving, and Upper Basin actions to support the Colorado River system. The Upper Basin reaffirmed its commitment to developing a post-2026 operating framework grounded in actual hydrologic conditions. Long-term solutions must reflect true hydrology, not unrealistic demands. “The quantification of hydrologic shortage is incredibly important. No amount of lawyering is going to fix the math problem.... [W]e must live with the river we have, not the river we want,” said Colorado Commissioner Becky Mitchell. <http://www.ucrccommission.com/>

Scott Cameron, Acting Assistant Secretary for Water and Science, addressing an Arizona Reconsultation meeting on June 17, said that Interior Secretary Doug Burgum wants him “intensely, consistently, and constantly” involved with the Seven Basin States “to try to find a path forward on the Colorado.” Burgum really wants a consensus solution to come from the basin States, but he is prepared as “watermaster,” to make a decision. Cameron said, “There is less water in the Colorado River...that’s the new reality, and we all have to live in the physical world as it is, not in the world as we hope it might be.” He emphasized the risks to the States of inaction. Tribes also need to be part of the solution. Interior will be doing an Environmental Impact Statement on future operations, with a draft by the end of this year, followed by comment, and an anticipated Record of Decision by May 2026. Also, Congress may have to act to “lock-in” a Seven States deal, as may the legislatures of Arizona and Colorado.

Tom Buschatzke, Director of the Arizona Department of Water Resources, at the same meeting said. “We are evaluating a supply-driven concept that shares the water that the river actually provides while requiring each basin to take actions to live within their respective shares. Unfortunately, the river continues to shrink, which obviously provides a real challenge for us. In its simplest form, basing the Lake Powell releases to Lake Mead on natural flow allows for a fair division of what Mother Nature provides to us.” While recognized as a potential break-through in negotiations, determining and dividing the “natural flow” of the river would still be challenging.

According to Jack Schmidt, Director, Center for Colorado River Studies at Utah State University, “Natural flow is an estimated value of what would flow in the river in the absence of human development.” That is, hypothetically, the amount of water that a free-flowing river would pass at Lees Ferry, Arizona, a point south of the Glen Canyon Dam that is the dividing line between the Upper and Lower basins. What would the flow be without upstream diversions, storage reservoirs and related evapotranspiration. While municipal and industrial diversions may already be measured, accounting for agricultural depletions would be much more difficult. Moreover, many agricultural uses in the Upper Basin predate the 1922 Colorado River Compact. How would these uses be affected by a “supply-driven” system?

The Upper Basin States are committed to remain actively engaged with the Bureau of Reclamation, Lower Basin States, Tribes and others, in finding a consensus-based Post-2026 Framework for sustainable and science-based management of the Colorado River. “We are dedicated to a consensus agreement. Anything else is likely to lead to litigation...and that leads to years and years of uncertainty, and none of us will win in that context,” said New Mexico Commissioner Estevan Lopez. Unregulated inflows to Lake Powell in 2025 are projected to be less than 54% of the 30 year-average, placing the system at renewed risk. With depleted storage in Lake Powell and Lake Mead, the dry conditions may push reservoir levels to critical thresholds, threatening hydropower releases and water supply.