

April 2023



WestFAST News

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Interior Department Announces Next Steps to Protect the Stability and Sustainability of Colorado River Basin

Outlines alternatives and tools needed to manage drought in the Basin and strengthen water security in the West

DOI 4/11/2023

To address the continued potential for low run-off conditions and unprecedented water shortages in the Colorado River Basin, the Department of the Interior's Bureau of Reclamation (Reclamation) today released a [draft Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement \(SEIS\)](#) to potentially revise the current interim operating guidelines for the near-term operation of Glen Canyon and Hoover Dams. Today's release comes on the heels of [historic investments](#) the Biden-Harris administration announced last week as part of an all-of-government effort to make the Colorado River Basin and all the communities that rely on it more resilient to climate change and the ongoing drought in the West.

The draft SEIS released today analyzes alternatives and measures to address potential shortages in the event that such measures are required to protect Glen Canyon and Hoover Dam operations, system integrity, and public health and safety in 2024 through 2026, after which the current operating guidelines expire. It also ensures Reclamation has the tools to protect continued water deliveries and

hydropower production for the 40 million Americans who rely on the Colorado River.

“The Colorado River Basin provides water for more than 40 million Americans. It fuels hydropower resources in eight states, supports agriculture and agricultural communities across the West, and is a crucial resource for 30 Tribal Nations. Failure is not an option,” said Deputy Secretary Tommy Beaudreau. “Recognizing the severity of the worsening drought, the Biden-Harris administration is bringing every tool and every resource to bear through the President’s Investing in America agenda to protect the stability and sustainability of the Colorado River System now and into the future.”

“Drought conditions in the Colorado River Basin have been two decades in the making. To meet this moment, we must continue to work together, through a commitment to protecting the river, leading with science and a shared understanding that unprecedented conditions require new solutions,” said Bureau of Reclamation Commissioner Camille Calimlim Touton. “The draft released today is the product of ongoing engagement with the Basin states and water commissioners, the 30 Basin Tribes, water managers, farmers and irrigators, municipalities, and other stakeholders. We look forward to continued work with our partners in this critical moment.”

The SEIS process was [initiated](#) in October 2022. The release of the draft follows months of intensive discussions and collaborative work with the Basin

states and water commissioners, the 30 Basin Tribes, water managers, farmers and irrigators, municipalities, and other stakeholders. The draft alternatives in the SEIS incorporate concepts from many models and proposals received during the scoping period, including from all seven Basin states.

The alternatives presented in the draft SEIS analyze measures that may be taken under Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland's authorities to protect system operations in the face of unprecedented hydrologic conditions, while providing equitable water allocations to Lower Basin communities that rely on the Colorado River System.

The draft SEIS includes proposed alternatives to revise the [December 2007 Record of Decision](#) associated with the Colorado River Interim Guidelines. The 2007 Interim Guidelines provide operating criteria for Lake Powell and Lake Mead. These include provisions designed to provide a greater degree of certainty to water users about timing and volumes of potential water delivery reductions for the Lower Basin States, as well as additional operating flexibility to conserve and store water in the system.

The draft SEIS will be available for public comment for 45 calendar days and the final SEIS is anticipated to be available with a Record of Decision in Summer 2023. This document will inform the August 2023 decisions that will affect 2024 operations for Glen Canyon and Hoover Dams.

This proposal to address immediate water supply challenges complements Reclamation's ongoing process to develop new guidelines for Colorado River Operations when the current interim guidelines expire at the end of 2026.

Draft SEIS Alternatives

The draft SEIS analyzes three alternatives, which reflect input from the Basin states, cooperating agencies, Tribes, and other interested parties, including comments submitted during the SEIS public scoping period, including two written proposals from the Basin states that informed the following alternatives considered in this draft SEIS:

- **No Action Alternative:** The No Action Alternative describes the consequences of

continued implementation of existing agreements that control operations of Glen Canyon Dam and Hoover Dam, including under further deteriorating hydrologic conditions and reservoir elevations.

- **Action Alternative 1:** Action Alternative 1 models potential operational changes to both Glen Canyon Dam and Hoover Dam. Action Alternative 1 includes modeling for reduced releases from Glen Canyon Dam, as well as an analysis of the effects of additional Lower Colorado River Basin shortages based predominately on the priority of water rights. Action Alternative 1 models progressively larger additional shortages as Lake Mead's elevation declines, and larger additional shortages in 2025 and 2026, as compared with 2024. The total shortage contributions in 2024, including those under existing agreements, are limited to 2.083 million-acre-feet because this is the maximum volume analyzed in the 2007 Interim Guidelines final environmental impact statement.
- **Action Alternative 2:** Action Alternative 2 is similar to Action Alternative 1 in how it models potential operational changes to both Glen Canyon Dam and Hoover Dam. Action Alternative 2 includes modeling for reduced releases from Glen Canyon Dam, as well as an analysis of the effects of additional Lower Colorado River Basin reductions that are distributed in the same percentage across all Lower Basin water users under shortage conditions. While both the 2007 Interim Guidelines and the 2019 Drought Contingency Plan encompass shortages and contributions that reflect the priority system, the incremental, additional shortages identified in Action Alternative 2 for the remainder of the interim period would be distributed in the same percentage across all Lower Basin water users. Action Alternative 2 models progressively larger additional shortages as Lake Mead's elevation declines and models larger Lower Basin shortages in 2025 and 2026 as compared with 2024. The total shortage contributions in 2024, including those under existing agreements, are limited to 2.083 million-acre-feet because this is the maximum volume analyzed in the 2007 Interim Guidelines FEIS.

Members of the public interested in providing input on the SEIS can do so through May 30, 2023, per instructions in the *Federal Register* that will be published on April 14, 2023. Additional information about virtual public meetings can be found at [Reclamation's website](#).

Historic Investments to Address the Drought Crisis

President Biden's Investing in America agenda represents the largest investment in climate resilience in the nation's history and is providing much-needed resources to enhance the resilience of the West to drought and climate change, including to protect the short- and long-term sustainability of the Colorado River System. Through the [Bipartisan Infrastructure Law](#), Reclamation is investing \$8.3 billion over five years for water infrastructure projects, including water purification and reuse, water storage and conveyance, desalination and dam safety. The Inflation Reduction Act is investing an additional \$4.6 billion to address the historic drought.

To date, the Interior Department has announced the following investments for Colorado River Basin states, which will yield hundreds of thousands of acre-feet of water savings each year once these projects are complete:

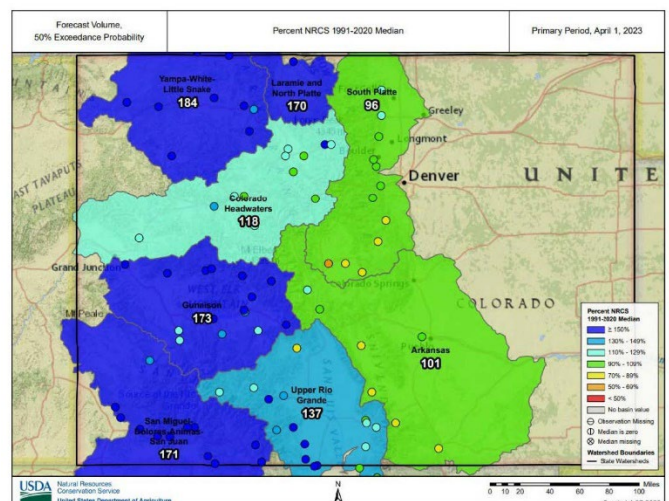
- \$281 million for [21 water recycling projects](#) that are expected to increase annual water capacity by 127,000 acre-feet annually
- Up to \$233 million in [water conservation funding](#) for the Gila River Indian Community, including \$83 million for a water pipeline project and an additional \$50 million from the Inflation Reduction Act through the [Lower Colorado River Basin System Conservation and Efficiency Program](#), which will also provide similar investments in 2024 and 2025
- Over \$73 million for infrastructure repairs on water delivery systems, \$19.3 million in [fiscal year 2022](#) and another \$54 million [announced last week](#).
- \$71 million for [32 drought resiliency projects](#) to expand access to water through groundwater storage, rainwater harvesting, aquifer recharge and water treatment
- \$10 million in new [water storage investments](#)

March Brought Record Snowpack Accumulation to Many Colorado Basins

The basins of Western Colorado continued to benefit from a series of storms throughout the month of March. During this time 34 SNOTEL sites in the state received the highest or second highest March snowpack accumulation amounts on record.

NRCS 4/21/2023

The basins of Western Colorado continued to benefit from a series of storms throughout the month of March. During this time 34 SNOTEL sites in the state received the highest or second highest March snowpack accumulation amounts on record. NRCS Hydrologist Karl Wetlaufer notes "The record high monthly snowpack accumulation fell on top of an already plentiful snowpack at many sites. This brought about 25 percent of SNOTEL sites in the state to their record or second highest values for April 1st." The spatial pattern of snowpack accumulation and streamflow forecasts this winter has been a shift from the previous three years where Western Colorado has experienced well below normal snowmelt runoff volumes and basins that flow east observed more plentiful runoff. "This year should provide a welcome reprieve for water supply and depleted reservoir storage across Western Colorado after several years of low streamflow" Wetlaufer continued. While forecasts are for the most plentiful volumes in the western half of the state the average of forecasts in the Arkansas and South Platte are for near normal volumes, albeit with a lot of variability point to point.



Reservoir storage across most major basins is near to slightly below normal except for the Gunnison and the combined San Miguel-Dolores-Animas-San Juan River basins of Southwest Colorado which are currently at 71 and 69 percent of normal, respectively. While several years of low streamflow have contributed to these deficits, current streamflow forecasts indicate that those values will likely be rapidly rising over the coming months. Given the plentiful snowpack and streamflow forecasts, in many areas reservoir management plans will also likely be taking flood prevention into consideration over the coming months as well.

After three years of below normal streamflow runoff across the state, 2023 is bringing a welcome change from a water supply standpoint to most major basins of Colorado, and arguably to some that needed it most. Hydrologist Wetlaufer notes “Overall, the water supply outlook for Colorado is looking quite positive for the upcoming runoff season.” While plentiful water is certainly good news in many respects, and it is worth keeping in mind that it can also come with an increased flood risk and a friendly reminder that one wet year doesn’t immediately cancel out several dry years.” Wetlaufer summarizes “With forecasts far above normal streamflow in much of the state residents should also be mindful of increased flood risk during peak flow. Additionally, it is important to bear in mind that in some basins, with the Colorado River being the prime example, one year of plentiful streamflow will not be enough to solve bigger picture water supply challenges in the long run.”

Basin	% MEDIAN SNOWPACK	LAST YEAR'S % MEDIAN SNOWPACK	% MEDIAN RESERVOIR STORAGE	LAST YEAR'S % MEDIAN RESERVOIR STORAGE
GUNNISON	156	100	71	63
COLORADO HEADWATERS	131	94	99	83
SOUTH PLATTE	111	92	94	105
LARAMIE-NORTH PLATTE	131	91	----	----
YAMPA-WHITE-LITTLE SNAKE	149	84	90	80
ARKANSAS	103	98	90	91
UPPER RIO GRANDE	140	101	104	93
SMDASJ*	177	92	69	65
STATEWIDE	137	94	88	83

* San Miguel-Dolores-Animas-San Juan River basin

**For more detailed information about February Mountain snowpack refer to [the April 1st, 2023 Colorado Water Supply Outlook Report](#). For the most up to date information about Colorado snowpack and water supply related information, refer to the [Colorado Snow Survey website](#).

Upcoming Meetings and Webinars

[WSWC 2023 Spring \(201st\) Meetings](#)

May 22-24, 2023, Reno, Nevada

Other Federal News

[BLM 4/5/23. BLM Awards Multi-Year Contracts to Address Orphaned Wells with Bipartisan Infrastructure Law Funds](#)

[DOI 4/5/23. Biden-Harris Administration Announces Nearly \\$585 Million from Bipartisan Infrastructure Law to Repair Aging Water Infrastructure, Advance Drought Resilience](#)

[DOI 4/21/23. Biden-Harris Administration Announces \\$35 Million for National Fish Passage Projects to Address Climate Resilience and Strengthen Local Economies](#)

[DOI 4/21/23. Secretary Haaland Announces \\$125 Million to Restore Nation’s Lands and Waters as Part of President’s Investing in America Agenda](#)

[DOI 4/21/23. Biden-Harris Administration Announces Over \\$140 Million for Water Conservation and Efficiency Projects in the West](#)

[DOI 4/27/23. Interior Department Announces More Than \\$146 Million for Wetland Conservation Projects and National Wildlife Refuges](#)

[EPA 4/27/23. EPA Invests \\$41 million in New Technical Assistance to Help Communities Address Wastewater Challenges](#)

[EPA 4/23. New Grant Program: Wildfire Smoke Preparedness in Community Buildings](#)

[NRCS 4/26/23. NRCS California Allocates \\$2 Million to Assist Farmers Recover from Floods](#)

[NOAA 4/13/23. What to watch for: El Nino likely to develop this summer](#)

[NOAA 4/13/23. Earth just had its second-warmest March on record](#)

[NOAA 4/10/23. Freight train of atmospheric rivers brought record rain, snow in March](#)

Reclamation 4/20/23. Reclamation releases Climate Change Adaptation Strategy

Reclamation 4/20/23. Above-average snowpack and projected runoff will send more water from Lake Powell to Lake Mead

USACE 4/25/23. Stronger, Lighter, More Durable: Ultra-High-Performance Concrete is key to a more sustainable and modern infrastructure network

USACE 4/25/23. From Antiquated to Automated: USACE wetland delineation tool helps revolutionize regulatory process

USGS 4/18/23. New USGS-FEMA Study Highlights Economic Earthquake Risk in the United States

USDA 4/20/23. Biden-Harris Administration Announces New Steps for Climate Resilience and Forest Conservation

USDA 4/23. Economic Brief Released on Groundwater Management

The Western States Federal Agency Support Team (WestFAST) is a collaboration between 13 Federal agencies with water management responsibilities in the West. WestFAST was established to support the Western States Water Council (WSWC), and the Western Governors Association in coordinating Federal efforts regarding water resources.