

1

COLORADO RIVER

THREAT: Climate change, outdated management

STATES:

U.S.: Arizona, California, Nevada, Colorado, Utah, New Mexico, Wyoming

Mexico: Baja California, Sonora

AT RISK:

Reliable water supplies, regional economy, river health

SUMMARY

The Colorado River provides drinking water for 40 million people, irrigates five million acres of farm and ranch land, and supports a \$1.4 trillion economy. All of this is at risk due to rising temperatures and drought driven by climate change, combined with outdated river management and overallocation of limited water supplies. River flows are at historic lows and the levels of Lake Powell and Lake Mead reservoirs are dropping precipitously. With the passage of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, the seven basin states and the Biden administration now have a critical opportunity to implement proven, equitable solutions that enhance water security and river health, while building resilience to future climate change. Failure is simply not an option, given all that depends on a healthy, flowing Colorado River.



YUMA, ARIZONA
PHOTO: AMY MARTIN

THE RIVER

The Colorado River is a vital lifeline for the Southwest and the entire nation as well as Northwestern Mexico. Beginning as snowmelt from the Rocky Mountains, the river flows 1,450 miles through seven states and into the Republic of Mexico on its way to the sea. It provides drinking water for 40 million people and supports some of our country's largest cities including Denver, Salt Lake City, Santa Fe, Las Vegas, Los Angeles, San Diego, Phoenix and Tijuana. The river is vital to our food supply, irrigating nearly 90 percent of the nation's winter vegetable crops. It flows through nine National Parks and is essential habitat for more than a dozen species of endangered fish and wildlife. The Colorado River supports a \$1.4 trillion economy, including \$26 billion in recreational spending and hundreds of thousands of jobs across the West. However, the river is so over-tapped that it dries up nearly 100 miles from its mouth at the Sea of Cortez.

Water scarcity has always dictated the rhythm of life in the Colorado River Basin. Pre-Puebloan people followed water across the desert landscape, and many waterways in the Southwest are considered sacred to Tribal Nations living in these arid lands. There are 30 federally recognized Tribal Nations in Colorado River Basin, many of whom depend directly on the Colorado River. The Gila River Indian Community, Cocopah and Quechan have pledged water in support of Lake Mead, practice crop-switching and fallowing and engage in restoration work to reduce impacts to the Colorado River system.

THE THREAT

There is not enough water in the Colorado River to meet all current needs. River management plans were built on a flawed assumption that the river carries nearly 18 million acre-feet (an acre-foot is about the amount of water to cover a football field, one foot deep), while in reality only about 13 million acre-feet has been historically available. The entire system is operating at a deficit, and climate change is expected to further reduce the river's flow by 10 to 30 percent by 2050.



1

COLORADO RIVER

Continued

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

MATT RICE

Southwest Regional Director
American Rivers
(303) 454-3395
mrice@americanrivers.org

SINJIN EBERLE

Southwest Communications Director
American Rivers
(720) 373-0864
seberle@AmericanRivers.org

JENNIFER PITT

Colorado River Program Director
National Audubon Society
(720) 841-5366
Jennifer.Pitt@Audubon.org

KEVIN MORAN

Senior Director, Water Policy & State Affairs
Environmental Defense Fund
(602) 283-8790
KMoran@edf.org

BART MILLER

Healthy Rivers Program Director
Western Resource Advocates
303.886.9871
Bart.Miller@westernresources.org

ALEX FUNK

Director of Water Resources & Senior Counsel
Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership
540.335.3729
AFunk@trcp.org

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

www.waterforarizona.com
www.waterforcolorado.org
www.tenstrategies.net
www.raisetheriver.org

TAKE ACTION:

[AmericanRivers.org/
ColoradoRiver2022](http://AmericanRivers.org/ColoradoRiver2022)

LAKE POWELL, UTAH

PHOTO: RAINER KRIENKE, UNSPLASH

Drought has impacted large portions of the Colorado River Basin for years—shrinking snowpack, hotter temperatures and increasing evaporation have led to widespread aridification (i.e., extreme dryness) that endangers water supplies and river health. In July 2021, water levels at Lake Powell fell to the lowest point since 1969 and have continued dropping.

This “new abnormal” is seriously impacting the environment and economy from the headwaters to the sea. For the first time ever, mandatory cutbacks triggered by water shortage will cause Arizona to lose more than 500,000 acre-feet in Pinal County alone (roughly the drinking water supply for nearly 1.5 million households). According to the most recent U.S. Bureau of Reclamation models, states and other water users in both the U.S. and Mexico could lose access to even more water in coming years that will impact cities and towns, and especially farms and ranches, across the Southwest. While collaborative efforts, such as Minute 323, the 2019 Drought Contingency Plan and the 500+ Plan show some promise, they do not go far enough to adequately address the significant and likely permanent decline in regional water supplies.

Furthermore, many Tribal Nations across the basin suffer from a lack of modern water infrastructure to deliver water to their people, due to systemic racism and historic disinvestment. Historically, tribes have been excluded from major river management decisions, despite having some of the most senior water rights across the Basin. Recently, Tribal Nations have imparted their wisdom, authority and influence via negotiations and collaboration with state and federal governments to find Basin-wide solutions to this crisis.

WHAT CAN BE DONE

The Bureau of Reclamation’s hydrologic modeling signals that it is time to do more than plan for the possibility of hotter, drier conditions in the Basin. We need to take bold action now to protect our water supply and the health of the Colorado River. With the passage of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act in the U.S., Colorado River Basin states have access to billions of dollars for projects that build climate resiliency and support the people and wildlife that depend upon the river. This is an unparalleled opportunity to invest in strategies that will position the region with its rivers, farms, and economy to adapt and even thrive in a hotter and drier future. The current crisis has forged closer ties and increased collaboration with Mexico, creating conditions for innovation and synergies at the international boundary. The [10 Strategies Report](#) is one example of a road map for investment of federal infrastructure dollars as well as innovative practices to keep more water flowing in the Colorado River and reduce the pressure on the regional water supply.

Federal agencies should include resilience priorities in spending plans for the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act and other funding, while deprioritizing projects that will not urgently enhance the resilience of the Basin to climate change. At the state level, governments should work to ensure that there are adequate match resources available and support capacity building for organizations to implement on-the-ground projects.

This future is not possible without leadership and representation of Colorado River Tribes. As sovereign nations, tribes must have a leading role in the deployment and implementation of federal infrastructure dollars and all future Colorado River management decisions. It is imperative that the seven Colorado River Basin states and the Biden administration engage with Tribal Nations to address this river emergency. They must act with urgency to invest and implement equitable and proven solutions to reduce water risk in the Basin and build a stronger future centered around a healthy Colorado River.