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Biden-Harris Administration Announces Historic Consensus System Conservation Proposal to Protect the Colorado River Basin

Seven Basin states agree on analyzing consensus-based approach proposed by the Lower Basin

Funding from President Biden's Investing in America agenda combined with voluntary commitments will conserve 3-million-acre feet of water through 2026

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WASHINGTON — The Department of the Interior today announced significant new developments in the Biden-Harris administration's efforts to protect the stability and sustainability of the Colorado River System now and into the future.

As part of the Department's continued efforts to address ongoing severe drought conditions and a changing climate in the Colorado River Basin, representatives from the seven Colorado River Basin states have agreed to the submission of a Lower Basin, consensus-based system conservation proposal. They are requesting the proposal be fully analyzed as an action alternative under the Bureau of Reclamation's draft Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (SEIS), published last month.

The consensus-based proposal – agreed upon by the three Lower Basin states – commits to measures to conserve at least 3 million-acre-feet (maf) of system water through the end of 2026, when the current operating guidelines are set to expire. Of those system conservation savings, 2.3 maf will be compensated through funding from the historic Inflation Reduction Act, which is supporting efforts to increase near-term water conservation, build long term system efficiency, and prevent the Colorado River System's reservoirs from falling to critically low elevations that would threaten water deliveries and power production. Under this consensus proposal, the remaining system conservation needed for sustainable operation will be achieved through voluntary, uncompensated reductions by the Lower Basin states.

"There are 40 million people, seven states, and 30 Tribal Nations who rely on the Colorado River Basin for basic services such as drinking water and electricity. Today's announcement is a testament to the Biden-Harris administration's commitment to working with states, Tribes and communities throughout the West to find consensus solutions in the face of climate change and sustained drought," said **Secretary Deb Haaland**. "In particular I want to thank Deputy Secretary Tommy Beaudreau and Reclamation Commissioner Camille Calimlim Touton, who have led the discussions with Basin state commissioners, Tribes, irrigators, local communities, and valued stakeholders to reach this critical moment."

"I commend our partners in the seven Basin states who have demonstrated leadership and unity of purpose in developing this consensus-based approach to achieve the substantial water conservation necessary to sustain the Colorado River System through 2026," said **Deputy Secretary Tommy Beaudreau**.

"Reclamation's SEIS process succeeded in facilitating this agreement, and we will carry forward the consensus proposal by analyzing it under the SEIS."

“For over a century, Reclamation has led with solutions grounded in partnership and collaboration. The agreement today continues in this tradition,” said **Bureau of Reclamation Commissioner Camille Calimlim Touton**. “I am proud of the Reclamation team’s work and thank our partners across the basin and the Basin states representatives for reaching this moment. This is an important step forward towards our shared goal of forging a sustainable path for the basin that millions of people call home.”

In light of the Lower Basin states’ conservation proposal, the Department today announced that it is temporarily withdrawing the draft SEIS published last month so that it can fully analyze the effects of the proposal under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). Reclamation will then publish an updated draft SEIS for public comment with the consensus-based proposal as an action alternative. Accordingly, the original May 30, 2023, deadline for the submission of comments on the draft SEIS is no longer in effect. The Department plans to finalize the SEIS process later this year.

Early next month, the Department will formally advance the process for the development of new operating guidelines replacing the 2007 Colorado River Interim Guidelines for Lower Basin Shortages and the Coordinated Operations for Lake Powell and Lake Mead at the end of 2026. In the coming weeks, Reclamation will publish the Notice of Intent for the Environmental Impact Statement related to the post-2026 guidelines.

President Biden’s Investing in America agenda represents the largest investment in climate resilience in the nation’s history and is providing pivotal 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 month
- \$71 million for 32 drought resiliency projects to expand access to water through groundwater storage, rainwater harvesting, aquifer recharge and water treatment
- \$20 million in new small surface and groundwater storage investments

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