

Scholars urge more research on future of Colorado River

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A coalition of scholars across the West is urging the federal government to partner with the National Academy of Sciences to study the future of the Colorado River, including if climate change is leading to reduced stream flow.

Twenty-three scholars from Western universities sent a letter Tuesday to Interior Secretary Sally Jewell detailing their request for more scientific research on a host of issues related to the Colorado River.

Chief among the concerns is if there will be enough water in the river to support 36 million users in seven U.S. states and parts of Mexico over the next 50 years.

The scholars argue the federal government is relying on a projection of a 9-percent stream flow decline by 2060, while skimming over other estimates that suggest it could fall by as much as 45 percent by 2050 due to climate change.

Secretary Jewell was expected to receive the letter early Wednesday. The Bureau of Reclamation this summer issued the results of a nearly three-year study that concluded that there will be significant shortfalls between water supply and demand on the Colorado River over the next 50 years.

But the scholars say in the letter that those conclusions "may be insufficient to accommodate the full range of risks that lie ahead."

Interior spokeswoman Emily Beyer said in an email that the department takes Colorado River and all Western water issues seriously and will review the letter once it is received.

The scholars who signed the letter include Robert Adler of the University of Utah law school; Victor Baker of the hydrology and water resources department at the University of Arizona; and Tim Barnett at the Scripps Institution of Oceanography in La Jolla, Calif.

Owen Lammers, executive director of Living Rivers and Colorado Riverkeeper, said the federal government needs to pursue a wider breadth of scientific projections to ensure it is prepared for all water flow scenarios. His group supports the scholars' efforts.

"We're hoping for the best when we should be preparing for the worst," Lammers said. "We are really putting society at risk without looking at some of these scenarios."

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