

# Facing Colorado River shortage, 30 urban suppliers pledge to target decorative grass

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With the federal government calling for major cuts in water use to address the historic shortage on the Colorado River, the leaders of 30 agencies that supply cities from the Rocky Mountains to Southern California have signed an agreement committing to boost conservation,

in part by pledging to target the removal of one especially thirsty mainstay of suburban landscapes: decorative grass.

The water agencies, which supply Denver, Las Vegas, Phoenix, Santa Monica, Burbank, San Diego and other cities, have committed to a nonbinding list of actions, including creating a program to remove 30% of "nonfunctional" grass and replace it with "drought- and climate-resilient landscaping, while maintaining vital urban landscapes and tree canopies."

The pledge could strengthen efforts across the Southwest to remove grass along roadsides and medians, and at homeowners associations, apartment complexes, businesses and other properties.

The 30 urban water suppliers also agreed in their memorandum of understanding to expand programs to improve water efficiency indoors and outdoors; increase wastewater recycling and reuse where it's feasible; and implement various "best practices" for conservation, such as offering rebates to customers who remove grass, adopting rate structures that incentivize saving, and establishing mandatory schedules for outdoor watering, among other things.

While urban water suppliers have already been working toward conservation goals, the agreement represents a broad-based effort by agencies throughout the Colorado River Basin that are "coming forward together and really doubling down on those commitments in light of the crisis that we're facing," said Liz Crosson, chief sustainability officer for the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California.

"This commitment from agencies from multiple states right now is hugely significant," Crosson said. "We're all coming to the same conclusion that we really need to address some of the remaining water waste that we see out there in our landscapes."

One of the prime areas where [water managers](#) see big potential to downsize are the sprinklers spraying unused strips of grass that line streets and the entrances of businesses and public properties, where no one walks except to mow. By converting those grassy patches that serve no recreational or community purpose to other types of plants that require less water, cities can substantially shrink their water footprint.

New measures have already been adopted in some states outlawing nonfunctional grass.

Last year, the Nevada Legislature passed a law that, starting in 2027, bans watering nonfunctional grass.

In May, California's State Water Resources Control Board adopted drought rules that similarly outlaw watering of nonfunctional grass.

And in October, the Metropolitan Water District's board passed a resolution recommending that cities and water agencies throughout Southern California pass ordinances permanently prohibiting nonfunctional turf at businesses, public properties and homeowners associations.

These measures don't affect lawns at people's homes, but many cities have also been trying to encourage homeowners to take out grass by offering rebates for each square foot converted to low-[water-use](#) plants. The Los Angeles Department of Water and Power recently increased its lawn-removal rebate from \$3 to \$5 per square foot.

In the Las Vegas area, more than 5 million square feet of grass has been removed and converted to desert landscaping this year, according to the Southern Nevada Water Agency.

Public officials who set water policies throughout the Colorado River

watershed are under growing pressure to find ways to rapidly reduce water use, in cities as well as farming areas.

The river has long been overallocated, and its flows have shrunk dramatically during a 23-year megadrought that is being amplified by humanity's heating of the planet. Lake Mead and Lake Powell, the nation's two largest reservoirs, now sit nearly three-fourths empty.

And scientists have warned that [climate change](#) is leading to long-term aridification of the region, eroding the amount of water that can be expected from the river.

Without major cuts in water use, the latest projections show growing risks of the reservoirs approaching "dead pool" levels, where water would no longer pass downstream.

Since June, [federal officials](#) have urged the seven states that rely on the river to come up with plans to reduce water use by 2 million to 4 million acre-feet per year, a decrease of roughly 15% to 30%. But negotiations among the states and water agencies have yet to produce an agreement on how to achieve that level of reduction.

The U.S. Interior Department and Bureau of Reclamation announced plans last month to revise their current rules for dealing with shortages, saying they may also need to release less water from the dams as the reservoirs continue to decline.

The signing of the agreement, which was presented to the Bureau of Reclamation, shows that urban water users are willing to move forward with approaches for dealing with drought and the effects of climate change, said John Entsminger, general manager of the Southern Nevada Water Authority.

"Given the lack of progress on the negotiations between the seven states, I think it demonstrates that reasonable people of goodwill can continue to make progress on important ways to use less water and adapt to a warmer, drier future," Entsminger said. "The future is going to require all of us to use less water, and you're really seeing that widespread acceptance of the need for adaptation."

Cities use roughly 20% of the Colorado River's water, while agriculture uses approximately 80%.

Southern California water districts recently submitted a proposal to the federal government to reduce water use by about 9% for the next four years.

One of those four agencies, the Imperial Irrigation District, uses the single largest allocation of Colorado River water to supply farms in the Imperial Valley. IID's managers have pledged to take on the largest share of California's reductions, saying they plan to prioritize conservation based on improving water efficiency rather than leaving fields dry and fallow.

"As we consider the long-term aridification of the Colorado River Basin, the math is simple: Water uses exceed water supplies," Entsminger said. "Every user is going to have to find a way to use less."

Leaders of seven environmental and conservation groups, among them the Environmental Defense Fund, American Rivers and the National Audubon Society, voiced support for the memorandum of understanding in a letter to the [federal government](#), calling it "an important step in the right direction."

"The [Colorado River] Basin no longer has the privilege of time to methodically prepare for a hotter and drier future," they wrote in the

letter. "The pace and scale of solutions to successfully reduce the Basin's water supply risks must be accelerated ... if we have any hope of assuring a sustainable Colorado River Basin going forward."

Madelyn Glickfeld, co-director of UCLA's Water Resources Group, said that the agreement is a good step but cities will need to do more, and that agricultural water districts should make similar water-saving commitments.

"Agriculture has got to consider growing less water-intensive crops," Glickfeld said.

As for the ubiquitous lawns in cities and suburbs, she said, "everyone should be taking out their nonfunctional grass—and even their functional grass where there are good replacements."

One big question will be how the [water](#) agencies get to the goal of removing 30% of nonfunctional grass, Glickfeld said.

"They've never done that. So let's see how they do," Glickfeld said, "and how fast they can do it."

"The changes we have to make are huge," she said. "And because we've let things get so bad, we don't have a hell of a lot of time."

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