

Competing Colorado River plans show seven states can't agree on how to manage critical water supply

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Negotiators for the seven states that rely on the Colorado River for nearly every aspect of life cannot agree on how to distribute its shrinking

water supplies in the coming decades.

Instead of a unified plan, the river's Upper Basin states—including Colorado—and the Lower Basin states submitted separate proposals to meet federal regulators' deadline this week. The proposals were made public Wednesday.

The dueling plans highlight disagreement between the basins on a key question: Who should bear the burden of coming water usage cuts? Colorado and other Upper Basin states argue downriver states, including California, already use more than they're supposed to.

"Although our proposal can stand on its own, it was also designed to promote the development of a seven-state consensus alternative, which is a goal we all still seek to achieve," said Wyoming's negotiator, Brandon Gebhart, about the Upper Basin plan.

State negotiators said that while a plan supported by all seven states would be ideal, they could not meet that threshold before a federal deadline to submit plans to operate the [river basin](#)'s two major reservoirs after 2026.

They pledged to continue negotiating and working toward a single proposal they could all agree on while the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation considers their separate plans.

The Colorado River provides water for 40 million people, irrigates millions of acres of agricultural land that feeds the country, generates electric power, fuels recreation-based economies and provides important habitat for thousands of species. But the amount of water in the river—overestimated from the beginning of a multi-state agreement—is shrinking because of drought and aridification intensified by climate change.

Water users have drained Lake Powell and Lake Mead, the major water storage units on the river, to dangerously low levels over the last decade.

The negotiators' task is to create a plan to allocate the water in the river in the coming decades in a way that accounts for shrinking flows, while replenishing the amount of water in the two reservoirs. Bureau of Reclamation officials will consider the proposals while developing new operational guidelines.

If the states cannot agree, the federal government will implement its own plan.

Negotiators for the Upper Basin states—Colorado, New Mexico, Wyoming and Utah—say they should not absorb cuts to their water because they already reduce water use every year, depending on snowpack. When there is not enough water in the system, the states limit their use of the river.

Upper Basin states have never used all the water they are entitled to, while the Lower Basin states—Arizona, California and Nevada—have used more than they are allocated, negotiators said.

"We can no longer accept the status quo of Colorado River operations," Becky Mitchell, Colorado's commissioner to the Upper Colorado River Commission, said in a news release. "If we want to protect the system and ensure certainty for the 40 million people who rely on this water source, then we need to address the existing imbalance between supply and demand.

"That means using the best available science to work within reality and the actual conditions of Lake Powell and Lake Mead. We must plan for the river we have—not the river we dream for."

Lower Basin negotiators, however, argue that the entire basin must be willing to make cuts to deal with the reality of climate change and drought.

"Adapting to climate change is not just the responsibility of one state or one basin," said JB Hamby, California's negotiator, during a news conference Wednesday.

Two plans differ on how much burden to share

The key difference between the river's upper and lower basins is how they access water. The Upper Basin states sit upstream from Lake Powell and Lake Mead and rely on snowpack and precipitation for water.

The Lower Basin states, situated below Lake Powell and Lake Mead, use water as it is released from the reservoirs.

Under current guidelines set in 2007, the amount of water released from Lake Mead for use in the Lower Basin reservoirs depends on projected water elevations.

The Upper Basin's new proposal calls for determining the annual amount of reductions in water released to the Lower Basin based on levels in Lake Powell and Lake Mead every Oct. 1, the beginning of the water year. The plan only includes cuts to the Lower Basin, though the Upper Basin would continue to develop conservation programs outside the operation of the reservoirs.

The Lower Basin's plan, meanwhile, includes cuts to both basins, basing the cuts on levels observed in seven reservoirs across the Colorado River system instead of at Mead and Powell alone. Its plan also calls for looking at how much water is in Blue Mesa Reservoir, Flaming Gorge

Reservoir, Navajo Reservoir, Lake Mohave and Lake Havasu. Blue Mesa is in Colorado, and Navajo Reservoir is in Colorado and New Mexico.

Under the plan, Lower Basin states alone would take cuts to their water usage if the reservoirs' combined storage is between 38% and 69% of maximum. Upper Basin states would begin to make cuts if the reservoirs' water drops below 38% of maximum storage.

Insufficient water flow "is a basinwide problem that requires a basinwide solution," said Nevada's negotiator, John Entsminger.

Modeling from the Lower Basin shows that had its plan been in place in 2022, the Upper Basin would have been required to make cuts. But at no other point in the last 20 years would the Upper Basin have had to cut its usage based on the criteria as proposed.

It will become increasingly difficult for Upper Basin negotiators to argue that those four states should not absorb any cuts, said Elizabeth Koebele, an associate professor of political science at the University of Nevada at Reno.

The Lower Basin's proposal to shoulder most of those reductions before asking anything of the Upper Basin is pretty convincing, she said. Future negotiations could focus on exactly when the Upper Basin should start making cuts.

Koebele sees points of agreement between the basins and says finding a consensus is possible.

"I think there's still a lot up in the air at this point," she said.

Can the basins find common ground?

Federal officials said this week that they're still hoping the seven states can reach consensus.

"We are not expecting every single issue to be smoothed out between the upper and lower basin," Laura Daniel-Davis, acting deputy secretary of the Department of the Interior, told reporters Tuesday. "But the reality is that everyone is saying the same thing: We are all committed to a basinwide solution, and we'll continue to work honestly and collaboratively through any major sticking points until consensus has been reached."

Two years of good precipitation and agreements from Lower Basin states to reduce their use in the short term—in exchange for federal dollars—means it's unlikely the river system will fail before 2027, federal officials said during the news conference.

"It has given us the breathing room to discuss the long term," Reclamation Commissioner Camille Calimlim Touton said.

Reservoir levels remain low—on Monday, Lake Mead was 37% full, and Lake Powell was 34% full.

Reclamation officials this month will begin reviewing the basins' submittals and start drafting possible plans to manage the reservoirs after 2026. The bureau expects to present those options, with an analysis of their potential impacts, by the end of the year.

The public then will have a chance to comment on those alternatives before the bureau makes a decision.

"Failure is not an option," Daniel-Davis said. "As we envision what the next several decades of Colorado River management look like, the Interior Department is taking every possible measure to ensure that this

vital system does not collapse."

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