

# Colorado River Basin



# WATER WARS

The Colorado River Basin Water Wars have been waging for decades. An attempt at a resolution took place way back in 1922 with the Compact, formally known as the Colorado River Compact. It is a foundational interstate agreement signed on November 24, 1922, in Santa Fe, New Mexico, that divides and apportions the waters of the Colorado River system among the seven U.S. basin states: Arizona, California, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, Utah, and Wyoming.

## Key Details and Provisions

- **Background and Purpose:** Negotiated under the oversight of then-Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover (who served as a federal representative), the compact resolved growing interstate conflicts over water rights. Lower Basin states (especially California and Arizona) were rapidly developing and diverting water (e.g., for irrigation in the Imperial Valley), while Upper Basin states feared being left with insufficient supplies due to the "prior appropriation" doctrine (first in time, first in right). The compact aimed to provide for equitable division, promote development, remove causes of controversy, and enable storage/flood protection.
- **Basin Division:** It splits the Colorado River Basin into two divisions at **Lee Ferry** (a point on the river in northern Arizona, one mile below the Paria River mouth):
  - **Upper Basin** (Upper Division states): Colorado, New Mexico, Utah, and Wyoming (plus small parts of Arizona and others draining above Lee Ferry).
  - **Lower Basin** (Lower Division states): Arizona, California, and Nevada (plus areas draining below Lee Ferry).

# **Colorado River Basin Water Wars**

## **A Brief Summary**

## **Water Apportionment:**

- Each basin is granted the **exclusive beneficial consumptive use** of **7.5 million acre-feet (MAF)** per year from the Colorado River system in perpetuity (total 15 MAF annually assumed available).
- The Lower Basin gets an additional right to increase use by **1 MAF** per year (for tributaries like the Gila River in Arizona).
- The Upper Basin must not deplete the flow at Lee Ferry below **75 million acre-feet** over any 10 consecutive years (ensuring delivery to the Lower Basin).
- Mexico's share (later formalized in a 1944 treaty) is supplied first from surplus; any shortfall is shared equally between basins.
- Other Provisions: It prioritizes domestic/municipal/industrial uses over power generation, promotes interstate comity, and allows for future equitable adjustments or storage projects.

## **Significance and Legacy:**

The compact is the cornerstone of the "**Law of the River**" (a collection of federal laws, treaties, court decisions, and agreements governing the Colorado River). It enabled major projects like Hoover Dam (1930s) and has shaped water management for over a century. However, it was based on an overestimated average annual flow (about 16–17 MAF at the time; actual long-term average is closer to 13–14 MAF, and climate change/drought have reduced it further), leading to ongoing shortages, tensions, and modern agreements (e.g., 2007 Interim Guidelines, 2019 Drought Contingency Plans).

Arizona initially did not ratify until 1944 (due to disputes over its allocation), and California had to approve amendments via the 1928 Boulder Canyon Project Act. The compact remains in effect today amid persistent drought and negotiations over cuts.

For the full text, see the official [PDF from the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation](#). See Page 20 for Slide describing the 1922 Compact.

## **Moving forward in time to the most recent Disputes:**

For over two years, the seven Colorado River Basin states (Arizona, California, Nevada in the Lower Basin; Colorado, Utah, Wyoming, New Mexico in the Upper Basin) have been negotiating new post-2026 operating guidelines for Lakes Powell and Mead. Current rules expire at the end of 2026. The core dispute centers on equitable sharing of shortages amid a 25+ year mega-drought, climate-driven aridification, and chronic overuse: Lower Basin states (with junior rights) have already conserved heavily and offered major cuts (Arizona up to 27% of its 2.8 MAF allocation, California 10%, Nevada 17%). Upper Basin states resisted firm, mandatory reductions, offering only limited voluntary measures (often 3–5%). Multiple proposals were exchanged, but no consensus has emerged. The following Graphic Presentation describes these negotiations and the reasons Arizona refuses to bow to the inequitable demands of the Upper Basin States. At this point, the Federal Government has gotten involved due to failed negotiation deadlines between the Upper & Lower Basin States.

### **Failed Feb. 14, 2026 Deadline**

- An initial federal deadline (Nov. 2025) was missed.
- A second, firm deadline of **Feb. 14, 2026** (set by the U.S. Department of the Interior under Secretary Doug Burgum) passed without agreement. Negotiators disbanded on Feb. 13 after final talks collapsed.
- Lower Basin governors (Newsom, Hobbs, Lombardo) and Arizona's lead negotiator, ADWR Director Tom Buschatzke, publicly criticized the Upper Basin for refusing shared responsibility. Buschatzke noted Arizona's willingness to compromise but emphasized that "all who benefit must share the burden."
- No immediate penalties, but the impasse heightened litigation risks and shifted momentum to federal action. States left the door open for future talks, but none have materialized.

## Federal DEIS Draft Process

The failure to reach a 7-state consensus **accelerated and confirmed reliance** on the federal backup process. The Bureau of Reclamation had already prepared and released the **Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) for Post-2026 Operational Guidelines and Strategies for Lake Powell and Lake Mead on January 9, 2026** (Federal Register notice Jan. 16). This 1,600+ page document fulfills NEPA requirements and analyzes five broad operational alternatives for 2027 onward (No Action, Basic Coordination, Enhanced Coordination, Maximum Operational Flexibility, Supply Driven).

### Impacts on Arizona (Up to March 2, 2026)

Arizona—reliant on the Central Arizona Project (CAP) with the most junior priorities—faces the greatest risk under all DEIS scenarios. Modeling shows potential CAP reductions of 17% to 58%+ (or depletions up to 71% of apportionment) in critically dry hydrology, with agriculture in Pinal/Maricopa counties hit hardest. Municipal supplies (Phoenix, Tucson) are largely protected by priority rules and existing conservation but would see indirect pressure via higher costs and increased groundwater pumping.

Arizona has already conserved >3.3 MAF since 2020 and entered Tier 1 shortages independently in 2026 (~512,000 AF cut this year). Buschatzke called the DEIS alternatives “very difficult and perhaps devastating” without equity. No immediate operational changes occur in 2026; the state is preparing litigation defenses while continuing to advocate for a voluntary basin-wide deal. As of March 2, the process remains open but firmly on the federal track.

For primary Sources: Reclamation’s DEIS hub ([usbr.gov/ColoradoRiverBasin/post2026](https://usbr.gov/ColoradoRiverBasin/post2026)) and ADWR statements ([azwater.gov](https://azwater.gov)). The situation remains fluid—watch for any post March 2 developments.

**Recreation of the Presentation by Mr. Tom Buschatzke, Director of the Arizona Department of Water Resources, January 27, 2026, to the AZ House of Representatives Committee on Natural Resources, Energy & WATER!**

The Boxes with Blue Borders are explanations of the Graphs presented in the Meeting by Mr. Tom Buschatzke. They are paraphrases of quotes made by this excellent presenter.

These Negotiations are on-going, and will not be resolved until October 1, 2026 either by a mutual Agreement by the UB & LB States or by the Federal Government.

**Click [HERE](#) To Go To Full Video**

# ADWR's Critical Functions

ADWR = Arizona Department of Water Resources

- Colorado River Management
- Technical assistance to the Court for General Stream Adjudications
- Administration of the Assured and Adequate Water Supply Program
- Statewide Regional Planning
- Dam Safety and Coordination of Flood Mitigation
- Administration of Recharge and Recovery Program
- Collection and Assessment of Hydrologic Data
- Administration of Groundwater Rights and Surface Water Rights
- Representation of the State of Arizona in Indian Water Rights Settlements



# Colorado River Allocations

1922 Colorado River Compact established Upper and Lower Basin States' allocations

## UPPER BASIN STATES - 7.5 MAF

1948 Upper Colorado Basin Compact established the Upper Basin States' apportionment.

Arizona 50,000 AF of Upper Basin water

## LOWER BASIN STATES - 7.5 MAF

California – 4.4 MAF

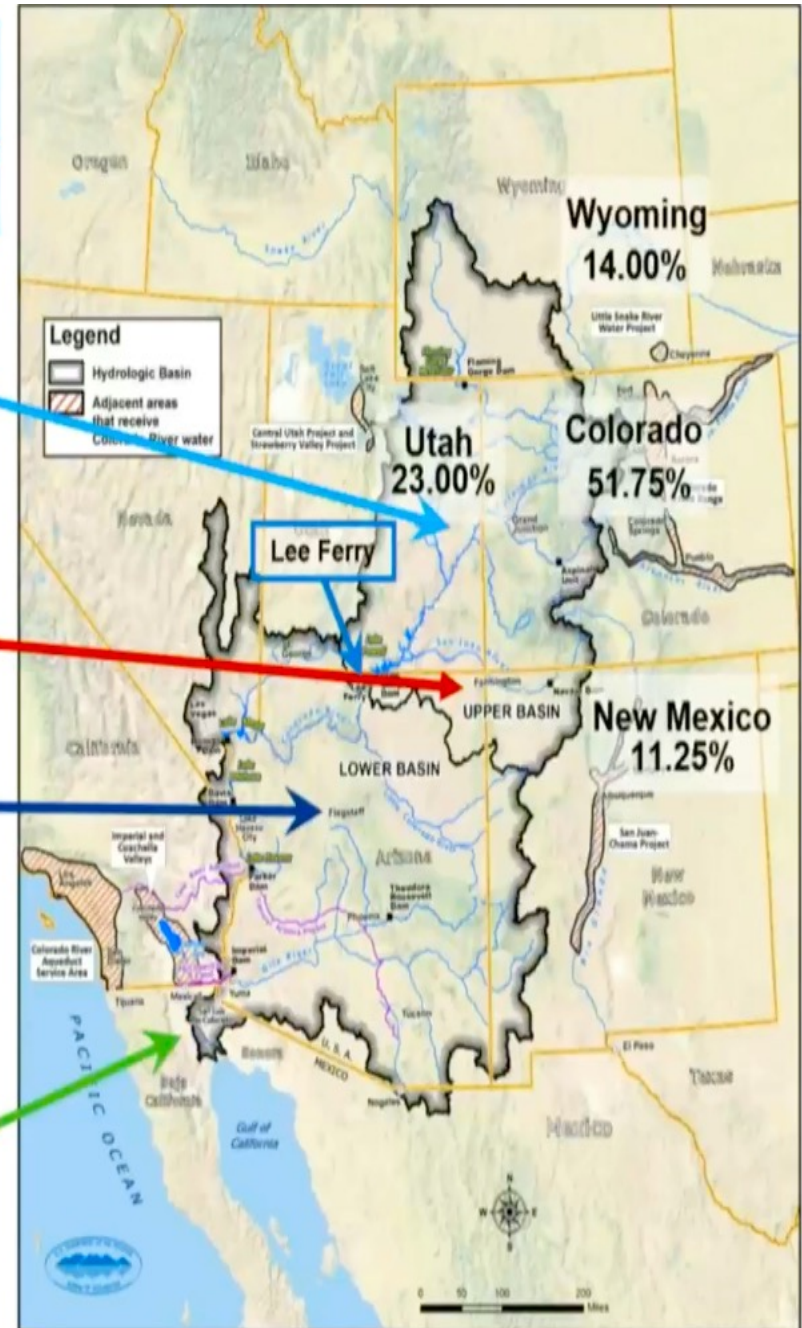
Arizona – 2.8 MAF

Nevada – 0.3 MAF

1928 Boulder Canyon Project Act established the Lower Basin States' apportionment.

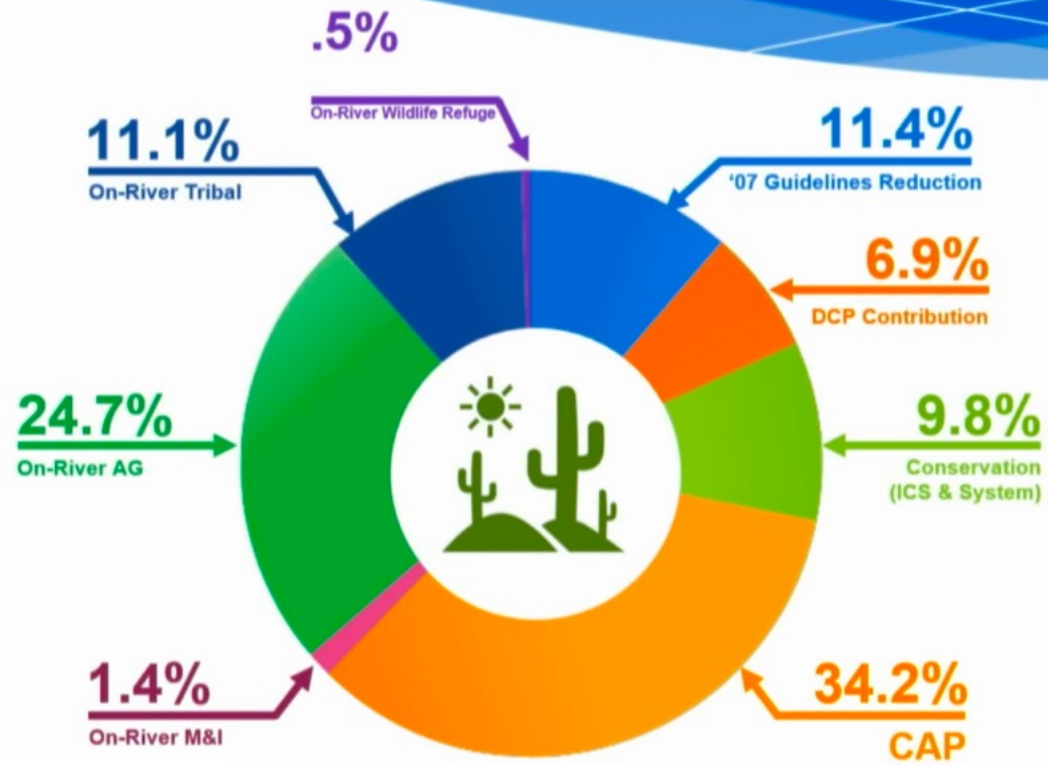
## MEXICO - 1.5 MAF

1944 Treaty with Mexico established Mexico's treaty deliveries.



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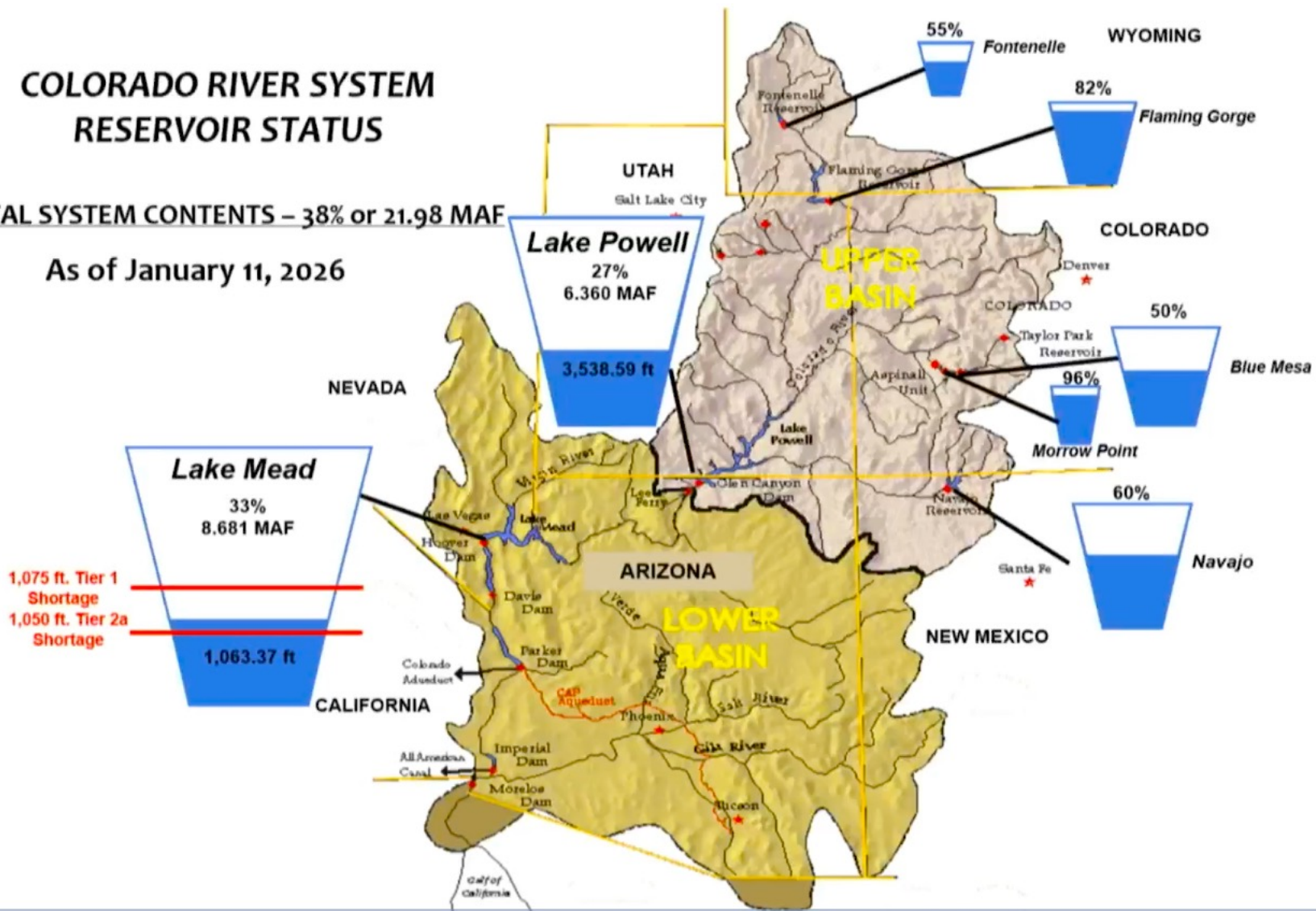
# Arizona's Colorado River Use (2022)



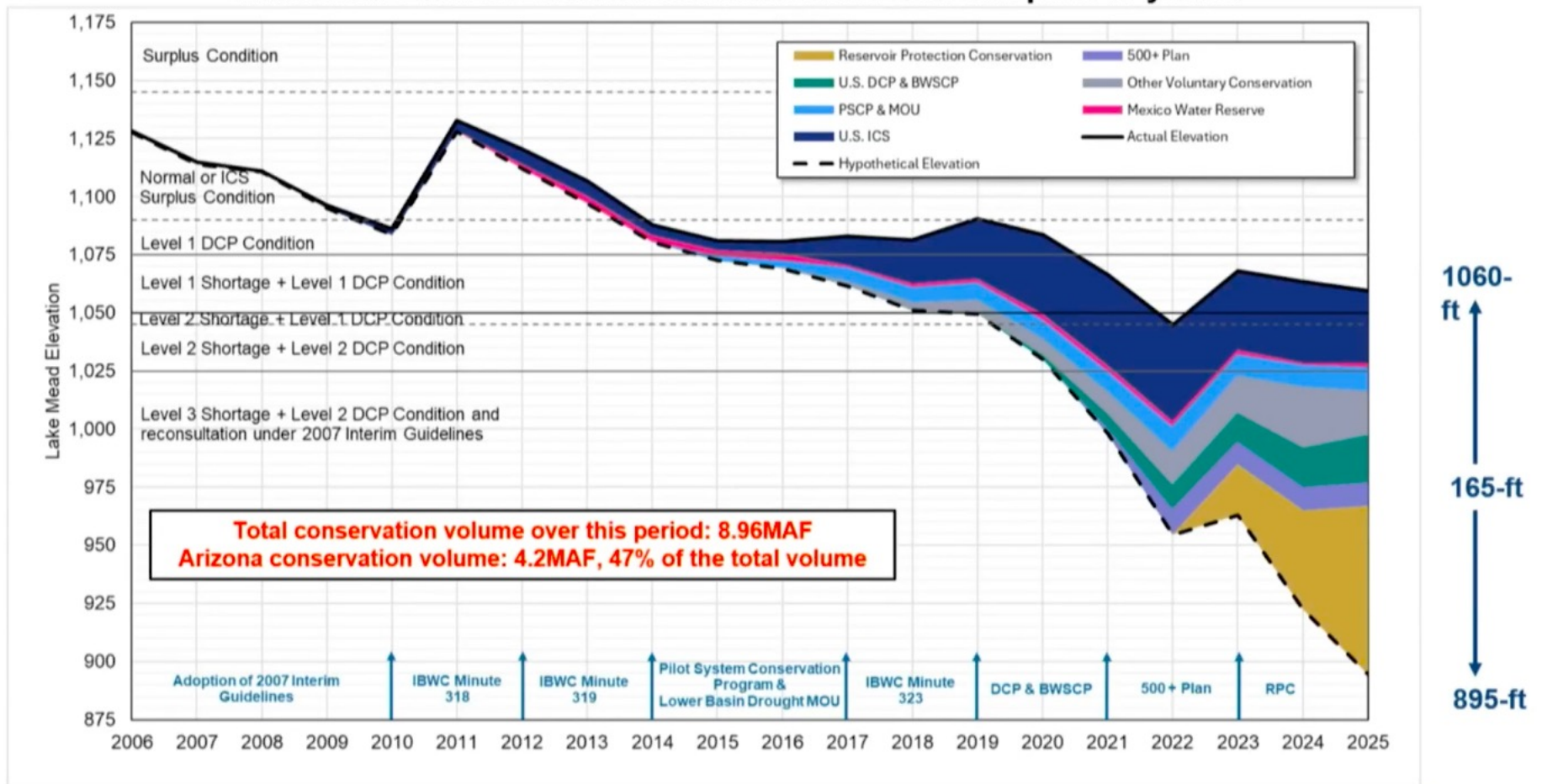
# COLORADO RIVER SYSTEM RESERVOIR STATUS

TOTAL SYSTEM CONTENTS – 38% or 21.98 MAF

As of January 11, 2026

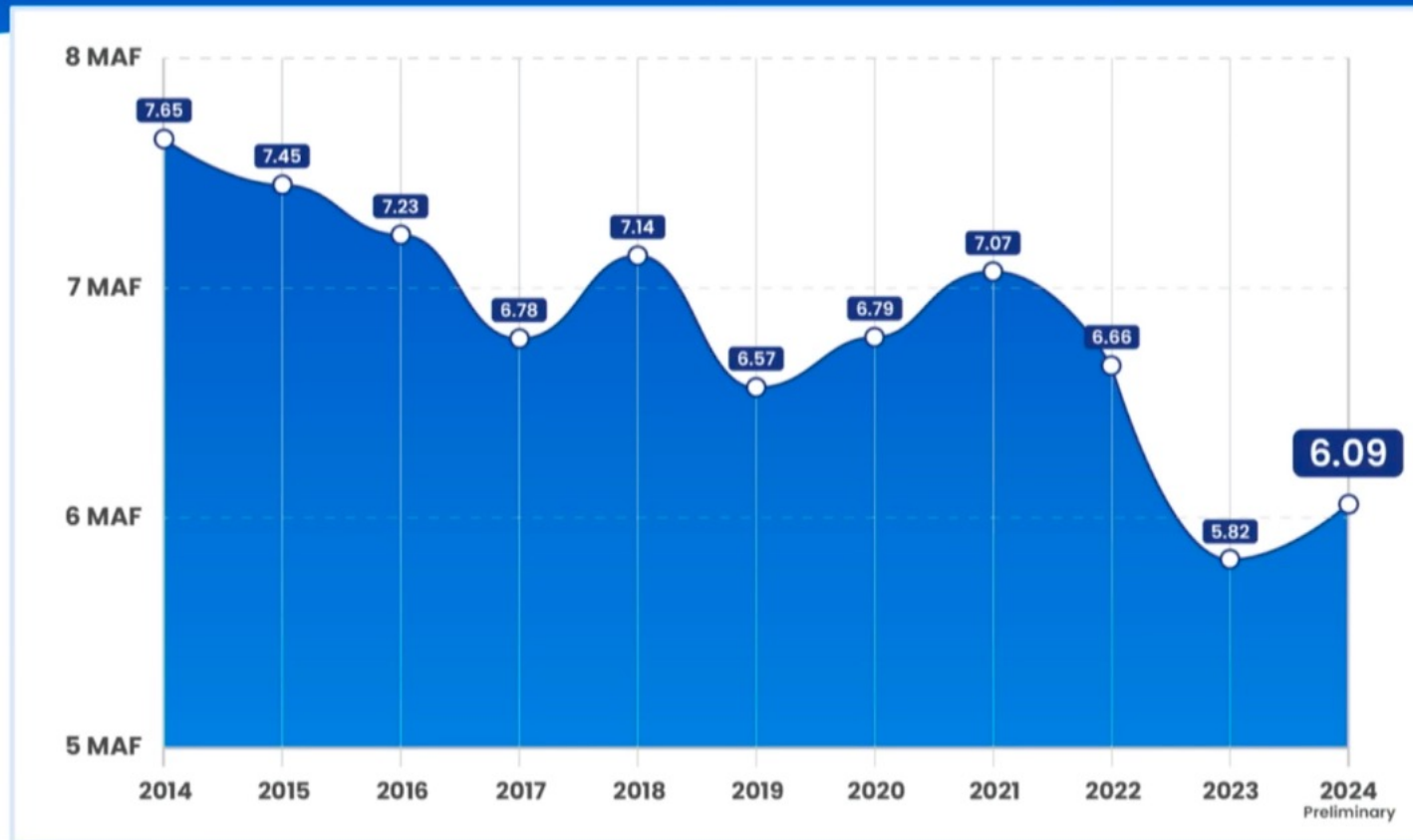


## Lake Mead would be at deadpool without the actions and investments taken over the past 16 years.



**Deadpool = There is so little Water in Lake Mead, it can't move out of the Dam down stream.**

# Lower Basin Consumptive Use (2014 – 2024)



8

Upper Basin States claim the Lower Basin is over using their Water. The above Graph illustrates Lower Basin's Consumptive Use from 2014-2024. Our allotted amount is 7.5 Million Acre Feet of Consumptive Use. The Upper Basin Authorities believe our Tributaries

# Arizona's Demonstrated Water Savings & Future Storage



As of November 2025  
 2025 Conservation Volumes are Preliminary

# Status of SEIS ROD Lower Basin Conservation

## As of June 2025

SEIS - Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement

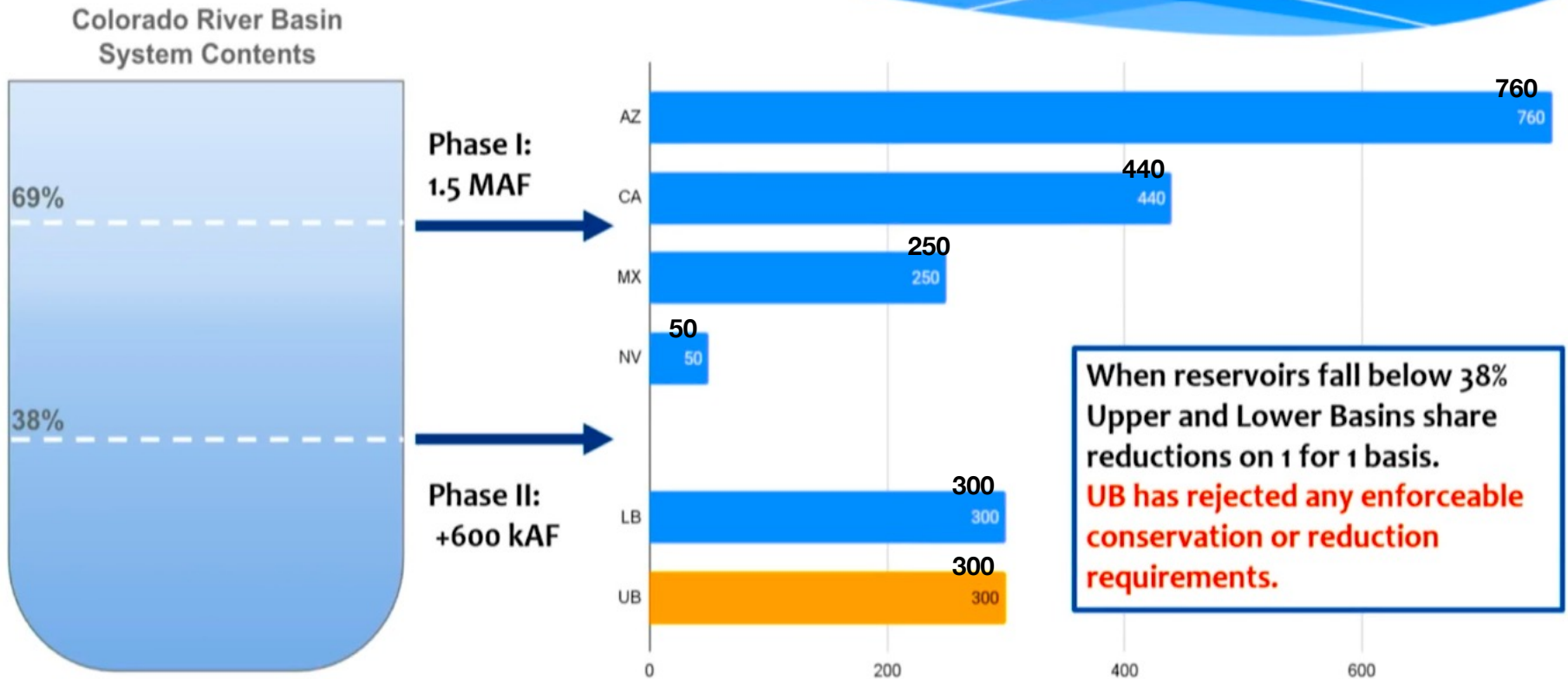
Year	Amount Conserved (acre-feet)	Cumulative Conserved (acre-feet)
2023 <sup>1</sup>	1,160,697	1,160,697
2024 <sup>1</sup>	871,014	2,031,711
2025 <sup>2</sup>	870,372	2,902,083
2026 <sup>2</sup>	771,148	3,673,231

**TOTAL CUTS  
Over 3 Yrs.**

<sup>1</sup>Information on accounted system conservation is documented in the 2023 and 2024 Water Accounting Reports, respectively, and can be found online at: <https://www.usbr.gov/lc/region/q4000/wtracct.html>

<sup>2</sup>All projected or provisional volumes are subject to change. Additional conservation activities are being considered including system conservation, ICS, and other conserved water in 2025 and 2026. These additional activities will be included in Reclamation's operational modeling.

# Lower Basin Shortage Sharing Framework



This Graph proposes what might be necessary post the 2026 Operating Agreement, which goes into effect Oct. 1, 2027, under certain circumstances. In March of 2024, as part of the EIS Process, we asked for an alternative. It wasn't an agreement. It was so they could look at how the Lower Basin might move forward. See the Blue Bars. Why is AZ taking a bigger cut than these other States? In 1968 as a price for the Authorization of the Essential AZ Project of the Colorado Basin Project Act, we agreed to take the Junior Priority that CAP would be cut first under certain circumstances. There's different interpretations as to what that means, but AZ has always put more water on the table to try to avoid litigation.

The Federal Govt. was supposed to look at augmenting the River by 1.5 MAF, which did not happen. The Blue Bars = 1.5 MAF, which is what's necessary to protect the sustainability of the River. Under Phase II is what would be necessary if it gets really dry in the future, we need more reductions to stabilize Lake Powell & Meade and keep them from drying up. We proposed that the Upper & Lower Basin States share this 600,000 AF reduction be equally shared, but they refused. They want LB to cut twice as much as UB.

## **Governor Katie Hobbs and bipartisan leaders of the Arizona State Legislature Joint, Bipartisan Letter on Colorado River Negotiations**

**On November 11, 2025, a joint, bipartisan letter from Governor Katie Hobbs and bipartisan leaders of the Arizona State Legislature was also sent to the Secretary of the Interior, Doug Burgum about the Colorado River negotiations, requesting the following:**

- An agreement that ensures that the future frameworks maintains compliance with the Colorado River Compact.
- Upper Basin States must offer meaningful, verifiable conservation commitments.
- Ensuring Arizona can continue to support its advanced technology ecosystem, world-class agriculture, military bases and the communities where millions of people live including 22 of the Basin's 30 Native American tribes.

# Negotiation Status

We need 8 MAF to move from Lake Powell to Lake Meade every year to keep Lake Mead stable ( with 1.5 MAF in cuts in the LB).

- **What Arizona needs to see in a deal:**
  - Release curve from Lake Powell that results in a relatively stable Lake Mead.
  - Substantial use of water from the reservoirs above Lake Powell.
  - Water use reductions in the Upper Basin to stabilize the system.

# Draft EIS

- Puts almost the entire burden on the Lower Basin states.
- Fails to analyze Compact compliance.

**The Federal Government prepared a 5 Alternatives EIS Draft that put almost all of the responsibility for cutting Water Use on the LB States.**

**During the transition from the Biden Admin. to the Trump Admin. We asked for that Alternative Draft to be withdrawn, but they didn't do it.**

The screenshot shows the Bureau of Reclamation website. At the top, the logo and name "BUREAU OF RECLAMATION" are visible. Below the logo is a navigation menu with items: "Water & Power", "Resources & Research", "About Us", "Recreation & Public Use", and "News & Multimedia". A search bar is located to the right of the navigation menu. The main content area features a large image of a river valley with the text "Colorado River Basin" and a sub-headline: "The Colorado River is a critical resource in the West. Seven U.S. states—Arizona, California, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, Utah, and Wyoming—and Mexico." Below this, there is a breadcrumb trail: "Reclamation / Colorado River Basin / Colorado River Post 2026 Operations / Colorado River Post 2026 Operations — Draft EIS". A sidebar on the left lists various topics under "COLORADO RIVER BASIN": "Colorado River Basin", "Hydrology", "Annual Operating Plans", "Drought Contingency Plans", "2007 Interim Guidelines", "Colorado River Post 2026 Operations", "Pre-Scoping", and "Scoping". The main content area has a heading "OPEN — Draft EIS Public Review and Comment Process" and a sub-heading "Post-2026 Operational Guidelines and Strategies for Lake Powell and Lake Mead – Draft Environmental Impact Statement". The text below the sub-heading states: "Reclamation has released the Post-2026 Operational Guidelines and Strategies for Lake Powell and Lake Mead – Draft Environmental Impact Statement. A Notice of Availability of the Draft EIS will be published in the Federal Register on January 16, 2026, starting a 45-day public review and comment period." It also mentions an interactive tool: "Additionally, Reclamation has developed an interactive tool designed to allow for easy comparison of figures across the Post-2026 Draft EIS. This tool can be accessed here: [CRB Post-2026 Draft EIS Figure Viewer](#). For tool assistance, email: [crbpost2026@ustr.gov](mailto:crbpost2026@ustr.gov)"

# 1922 Compact Issues



Compliance means flow of the Colorado River at Lee Ferry shall not be below an aggregate of 75 MAF over a rolling 10-year period, plus annual releases equal to one-half the Mexico Treaty burden.

That is 7.5 MAF Annually, which is only .5 MAF below what we're asking for.

# Next Steps

- Preparing for Colorado River reductions.
- Advocate to the federal government to broker an equitable deal.
- Expect federal government to continue to convene discussions among the Seven Basin States through February 14.

**Originally Created by the Arizona Dept. of Water Resources  
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