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# Arizona lawmaker accused of endangering Colorado River drought plan

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In this Oct. 14, 2015, file photo, a riverboat glides through Lake Mead on the Colorado River at Hoover Dam near Boulder City, Nev.

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By **JONATHAN J. COOPER** and **THE ASSOCIATED PRESS** | The Associated Press

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PHOENIX — Top Arizona Democrats on Friday accused the Republican House speaker of risking the collapse of a drought plan for the Colorado River by pushing legislation that has angered the Gila River Indian Community, a key player in the negotiations to protect the water supply for 40 million people.

But Speaker Rusty Bowers dug in, saying he has no plans to withdraw the measure that Gila River Gov. Stephen Roe Lewis said threatens water rights that the tribe gained through a landmark settlement in 2004 at the culmination of a decadeslong battle.

Arizona and California are the last of seven states to finalize plans for ensuring enough water exists for cities, farmers and others or risk the federal government drawing up rules as a drought threatens supplies from the river.

“I don’t know what the speaker hopes to accomplish with this,” House Democratic Leader Charlene Fernandez of Yuma said in a statement. “But if it’s federal control of our drought contingency measures and the destruction of our Central Arizona agriculture economy, it looks like he’s on the verge of getting it.”

Sen. Lisa Otondo, a Yuma Democrat, said Bowers was sabotaging the drought plan and “deliberately attempting to upend years of hard work that went into it.”

Bowers’ measure would change the state’s “use it or lose it” water rights law. He said he introduced it because a group of farmers has been “financially destroyed” by lawsuits from the Gila River community. He said it’s “unfortunate and inappropriate” that the tribe is leveraging its support for the drought plan to defeat his measure.

If the tribe wants to back out of the drought deal, Bowers said, “that is their choice. We hope they will reconsider.”

The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation has given Arizona and California a March 4 deadline to get agreements from all parties within their states, including the Gila River community, or the agency will start gathering comments from Western governors about what to do next. The agency is under the Interior Department, which has broad but unspecified authority over the lower Colorado River basin.

Utah, Colorado, Wyoming and New Mexico in the upper basin have finished their drought plans, as has Nevada in the lower basin.

The Gila River leader spoke out against Bowers' measure when it was introduced and issued another rebuke after a committee hearing was scheduled for next week. As speaker, Bowers wields significant leverage over other lawmakers if he decides to use it to push his measure through the Legislature.

"This step may very well prevent us from being in a position to approve the (drought plan) in time to meet the very real deadline established by the Bureau of Reclamation, or in fact ever," Lewis, the tribal governor, said in a statement.

He said the tribe would not sign on to the drought plan "unless the bill were withdrawn or the community were to receive some other reliable indication that it will not be moving forward."

Gov. Doug Ducey's office declined to offer that Friday, saying Ducey is focused on action in Washington, D.C., despite the challenge at home.

"Our current focus is on working with the other basin states to pass enabling legislation through the United States Congress," Ducey spokesman Patrick Ptak said. "We're committed to seeing (the drought contingency plan) through."

Under the drought plan, the Gila River community would provide water for farmers in central Arizona who otherwise would lose it and would store water in Lake Mead on the Arizona-Nevada border that is instrumental to the drought plan. A group that crafted the plan in Arizona is meeting for the final time next week.

The Gila River Indian Community established along the Gila River faced severe water shortages after the river was dammed upstream in the 1920s. But in 2004, following a decadeslong battle, it acquired enough water through one of the largest-ever American Indian water rights settlements to fill nearly 313,500 Olympic-sized swimming pools annually.

About half of the community's entitlement flows through Central Arizona Project canals that deliver water to Arizona's major metropolitan areas, making the tribe the largest CAP customer statewide. The tribe has been trying to revive its once-thriving agriculture tradition.

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Associated Press writer Felicia Fonseca contributed from Flagstaff.