

# Colorado River district GM unveils manifesto for water-use reductions

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GRAND JUNCTION — Andy Mueller, the general manager of the Colorado River District, presented six principles last week to guide an emerging federal and state program designed to reduce water use in order to avoid a compact call on the Colorado River.

Mueller spoke at a seminar produced by the River District in Grand Junction that attracted 265 people. The theme of the seminar was "Risky Business on the Colorado River."

The first two principles Mueller described Friday at the meeting relate to a legal bucket-within-a-bucket that the upper-basin states of Colorado, Utah and Wyoming plan to create through federal legislation in Lake Powell, which would allow the three states to control water that they deliver to the big federal reservoir through a demand management, or water-use reduction, program.

The River District's first principle is that such a storage program in Lake Powell should be "free of charge" and designed "for the benefit of the upper basin to avoid a compact violation."

The district's second principle says water stored in Lake Powell from a demand-management program should "not be subject to equalization or balancing releases from Lake Powell."

That principle stems from a set of interim guidelines approved in 2007 by the upper-basin states and the lower-basin states of California, Arizona and Nevada that seek to use water from Lake Powell, when it is at certain levels, to keep Lake Mead operational.

Mueller and other upper-basin regional water managers think the guidelines, which expire in 2026, now allow the lower basin to take more water than it deserves under the 1922 Colorado River Compact.

Mueller told his audience that the demand-management pool to be created in Lake Powell is "for preventing lower-basin entities from sucking too much water down that river."

So the second principle is meant to protect the upper basin from the lower basin.

The other principles are designed to either protect the Western Slope from the state, which is discussing potential mandatory cutbacks in water use in order to avoid a compact call, or from the Front Range, which may support such a measure, according to Mueller.

The River District's board members are determined to protect agricultural interests on the Western Slope, which use about 1.4 million acre-feet of water from the Colorado River system every year, mainly for irrigating alfalfa fields and pastures.

By comparison, Front Range cities use about 360,000 acre-feet of water a year from the Colorado River Basin through their transmountain diversion systems, which are junior to the 1922 Colorado River Compact.

And if those cities have that water cut off in the face of a call under the compact, Mueller said they would come buy out willing irrigators on the Western Slope and dry up their fields.

The River District's third principle is that any use-reduction program in the upper-basin states must be "voluntary, temporary and compensated" and "must reflect proportionate contributions from each upper division state."

Mueller said the River District supports a "guided market" approach to paying water users to use less water and let it flow instead to Lake Powell.

"What we're opposed to is some form of mandatory uncompensated curtailment of water rights, whether it is pre- or post-compact," he said.

The fourth principle is that there must be "no injury to other water rights."

The fifth principle is that there must be "no disproportionate impacts to any single basin or region with Colorado."

Mueller said Friday that the demand-management program must "make sure that the pain that comes with the reducing consumption of water is actually equitably distributed and applied to all users, everybody with a straw in the river."

Mueller explained that the post-1922 water rights in the Colorado River basin are roughly split equally between the transbasin diverters on the Front Range and users on the Western Slope.

"These junior water rights that are diverting significant amounts of water to the Front Range, along with our junior water rights on the West Slope, are the ones that need to be willing to share in this demand-management program, in the intentional reduced use," Mueller said.

The sixth principle is that a demand-management program must be consistent with what's known as "the conceptual framework" in Colorado's 2015

water plan relating to future potential transmountain diversions.

"We're not going to curtail our uses on the West Slope and send demand-management water down to Lake Powell, only to have another transmountain diversion come in and suck water to the East Slope," Mueller said. "That's what the state agreed to when it agreed to the state water plan, and we're saying that needs to be upheld."

Mueller's last slide said "the Colorado Water Conservation Board and the state engineer should agree to abide by these principles and not go beyond them without unanimous agreement among those entities charged with protecting the state."

He plans to deliver that message to the CWCB when it meets Wednesday in Steamboat Springs.

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