

Colorado River District leaders to discuss idea of mandatory water cuts across state

Brent Gardner-Smith / Aspen Journalism October 15, 2018

How Colorado may respond to a growing call to reduce water uses on the Colorado River system will be the subject of a robust discussion today in Glenwood Springs as the Colorado River District board gathers for its fall quarterly meeting.

Andy Mueller, the district's general manager, said he expects the prospect of the state developing a mandatory program to reduce water use to generate "a very lively and upfront discussion" among the district's board members, who represent 15 Western Slope counties, including Pitkin, Eagle and Garfield.

Last week, four draft agreements were unveiled by various entities that provide the basis for drought contingency plans being developed in the upper and lower Colorado River basins.

The upper basin's plans include seeking federal approval to store water in Lake Powell to bolster the reservoir's dropping water level without the water being released to the lower basin under existing guidelines and regulations.

The ability to develop a secure "demand management pool" of water in Lake Powell and other upper basin reservoirs is seen as a key element by water managers working to create a program in Colorado that would pay water users to reduce the amount of water they use on a "voluntary, temporary and compensated" basis.

However, such storage also is key to developing a demand management program that is mandatory and uncompensated, which Front Range water users recently told the state they expect may be necessary in the face of

declining natural water supplies due to global carbon burning.

To date, officials at the state's
Colorado Water Conservation Board

Recommended Stories For You

who are working on a demand management program insist they are only considering a voluntary, temporary and compensated program. They are reluctant to discuss the possibility of a mandatory program.

But there is increasing recognition on both sides of the Continental Divide that a mandatory program may, in fact, be necessary if the ongoing drought persists.

"While our district has opposed the mandatory demand management model without a proper public discussion and consensus, we recognize that the overuse in the lower basin, coupled with the continuation of extremely poor hydrology, may in the future cause us all to support or at least be willing to endure an anticipatory mandatory curtailment," Mueller said in a Oct. 5 memo to the district's board of directors.

He also said in his memo that officials with various Front Range water providers recently told the Colorado Water Conservation Board "a voluntary program was a fine goal but that they believed the state needed to roll out a program which includes rules and requirements for mandatory anticipatory curtailment."

John McClow, a former CWCB member, the general counsel for the Upper Gunnison Water Conservancy District in Gunnison and an alternate representative from Colorado on the Upper Colorado River Commission, said in an interview last week that the view of the Front Range water providers about the potential necessity of a mandatory program has some merit.

"The temporary, voluntary, compensated reduction in consumptive use is the way we have looked at since 2014, and that's what the public is accustomed to," McClow said. "And most of us think that's a good idea. The problem we

have, though, is what if it isn't enough? What if it doesn't work? There has to be a backup.

"Many people who are experienced and competent water managers are saying, 'Look, it's just not possible to make up the amount of the deficit through this voluntary program,'" McClow said. "There just aren't players out there, and there isn't enough money."

But Mueller and McClow feel that the state, via the conservation board, has an obligation to try to reduce water use in the Colorado River system in a way that is equitable to agriculture and cities, on both sides of the Continental Divide.

"They have an obligation to work toward protecting all water users, East Slope, West Slope, etc.," McClow said. "That's the responsibility of the state."

Mueller said last week he was heartened that the directors of the conservation board agreed Oct. 4 to draft a policy shaping a potential demand management program for Colorado that may address the River District's concerns.

"I view that as a positive outcome and appreciate them taking that step," Mueller said. "If we allow that (demand management) pool to be set up without a commitment by our state to stand by those principles that their staff has been out there talking about and endorsing, it gives great concern."

Editor's note: Aspen Journalism is collaborating with The Aspen Times on coverage of rivers and water in the Colorado River basin. More at <http://www.aspenjournalism.org>.