

NEWS > ENVIRONMENT

Feds may order first cuts in water from Colorado River; CU team issues warning to next president

Feds say Arizona, California and Nevada could face shortages starting in 2018



ustin Sullivan, Getty Images

A tall bleached 'bathtub ring' is visible on the steep rocky banks of Lake Mead at the Hoover Dam on May 12, 2015 in Lake Mead National Recreation Area, Arizona. As severe drought grips parts of the Western United States, Lake Mead, which was once the largest reservoir in the nation, has seen its surface elevation drop below 1,080 feet above sea level, its lowest level since the construction of the Hoover Dam in the 1930s.

By **BRUCE FINLEY** | bfinley@denverpost.com

November 5, 2016 at 12:04 am

A University of Colorado team led by a former Obama administration water chief has issued a water warning to the next president: the Colorado River cannot meet the current needs of 35 million westerners and cuts likely must be made.

The next president could be faced with ordering a first-ever reduction in water siphoned from the river by 333,000 acre feet next August, a report by the Colorado River Future Project contends. That's an amount equivalent to the water used in 666,000 homes.

U.S. Bureau of Reclamation officials on Tuesday confirmed the finding. Federal models show a 48 percent chance that, without cuts, lower basin states Arizona, California and Nevada would face shortages starting in 2018.

Anne Castle, President Obama's former Interior Department Assistant Secretary for Water and Science and now a senior fellow at CU's Getches-Wilkinson Center for Natural Resources, Energy and the Environment, led a team of five researchers. They interviewed 65 western [water policy experts and decision-makers](#) in addition to analyzing federal data.

"This really is a critical time. Action is required. We're closer to the edge than we ever have been," Castle said.

The report concludes the next president must prioritize a Colorado River "crisis" within the first 100 days and ensure that key positions dealing with water are filled. A convergence of events related to the river includes an essential not-done deal with Mexico, which has claims on a share of river water, and unresolved claims by Navajo and other Indian tribes.

An imbalance in water use along the river — cities and farmers for a decade have been taking more than the river gives — means future development in the arid West may not be possible because there's not enough water, Castle said.

"It depends on how you do it. The major municipal suppliers have shown they can reduce per-capita water usage so they can serve more homes with the same amount of water," she said. "But increasing the draw on the Colorado increases the risk of shortages for every other water user in the Colorado River Basin."

The CU team sent the report to presidential transition teams for candidates Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump. Clinton officials said they'd like to discuss the findings, but the Trump team has yet to respond.

[Thirty-five million people in seven western states rely on the Colorado River for water.](#) Population growth in the West continues at a rate of about 13.8 percent per decade, faster than the overall national rate around 9.7 percent.

For a decade, cities and food growers who irrigate 5 million acres have drawn far more than the river gives. This imbalance, combined with recent dry years, has led to a draw-down of Lake Mead, created by Hoover Dam, to record low levels. On Tuesday, federal officials said the water level measured 1,076 feet (9.5 million acre feet), or 37 percent of capacity — right at the threshold for ordering cuts. A draw-down of Lake Mead forces, under legal agreements, a draw-down of Lake Powell, above the Grand Canyon, which imperils hydro-electricity essential for the western power grid.

Drawing down Mead water levels below that threshold triggers, under 2007 legal guidelines for western states, federal intervention to order cuts. The initial cuts starting in January 2018 would reduce water diverted to Arizona (by 320,000 AF out of the state's 2.8 MAF share) and Nevada (13,000 AF out of the state's 300,000 AF share).

Federal officials who operate dams along the Colorado River said they agree with the Colorado River Future Project's conclusions.



Justin Sullivan, Getty Images

A bleached “bathtub ring” is visible on the rocky banks of Lake Powell on March 28, 2015 in Page, Arizona. As severe drought grips parts of the Western United States, a below average flow of water is expected to enter Lake Powell and Lake Mead, the two biggest reservoirs of the Colorado River Basin.

“Obviously, the next administration will set its own priorities. However, we

agree that follow-through on the activities identified in the Colorado River Future Project Report should be prioritized,” Bureau of Reclamation spokesman Peter Soeth said.

Obama administration officials “have prioritized science-based decision making on the Colorado River, and we are working to reach agreements within the U.S. and with Mexico to address the effects of historic drought and a rapidly changing climate,” Bureau of Reclamation Commissioner Estevan Lopez said. “Our efforts to work with stakeholders, tribes, states and our neighbors in Mexico are all designed to reduce risk in the Colorado River Basin — and will provide a foundation for continued engagement and progress on the Colorado River in the months and years ahead.”

The 1922 Colorado River Compact divvies use of river water — calculated initially to be 15 million acre feet (MAF) but now estimated at 13.7 MAF a year — between upper basin ([Colorado](#), New Mexico, Utah, Wyoming) and lower basin (Arizona, California, Nevada) states and Mexico.

Federal officials would order and enforce the cuts in water use.

“The goal is not necessarily a far more aggressive federal oversight role,” Castle said.

“But what we are noticing is that a confluence of events in the next 12 months will have a big influence on the ability of that river to continue to provide a reliable supply for the river basin that has grown up relying on it.”

TAGS: **COLORADO RIVER,** **WATER**



Bruce Finley

Bruce Finley covers environment issues, the land air and water struggles shaping Colorado and the West. Finley grew up in Colorado, graduated from Stanford, then earned masters degrees in international relations as a Fulbright scholar in Britain and in journalism at Northwestern. He is also a lawyer and previously handled international news with on-site reporting in 40 countries.

Follow Bruce Finley @finleybruce
