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Future CAP shortage risks rising, federal agency says

Tony Davis May 9, 2018 Updated 18 hrs ago

The longer-range outlooks for Lake Mead and the Central Arizona Project are increasingly grim due to this year's bad runoff, the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation says.

The bureau's latest forecast for the river shows that while the chance of a CAP shortage next year is almost nil, the chances for one in 2020 is over 50 percent. Looking farther ahead, the chances of shortage for 2021 through 2023 exceed 60 percent all three years, the bureau said.

The gloomy forecasts are based in part on this year's expected poor spring-summer runoff into Lake Powell at the Utah border from the Upper Colorado River Basin states of Colorado, Wyoming, Utah and New Mexico. The most recent forecast from last week predicted that the runoff would be only 42 percent of average, down from a 43 percent runoff forecast in April.

In its news release announcing the forecasts, the bureau pushed hard for Arizona, California and Nevada to quickly move to approve the Lower Colorado River Basin Drought Contingency Plan. It would require increasing cutbacks in the three states' use of river water in the near term to prevent Lake Mead from dropping to catastrophically low levels over the coming decade.

Bureau of Reclamation Commissioner Brenda Burman issued a similar call for the four Upper Basin states to approve their own drought plan. She said both basins should approve such plans by the end of 2018.

"We need action and we need it now. We can't afford to wait for a crisis before we implement drought contingency plans," Burman said. "We all — states, tribes, water districts, non-governmental organizations — have an obligation and responsibility to work together to meet the needs of over 40 million people who depend on reliable water and power from the Colorado River."

Specifically, the bureau said:

-- In 2019, the risk of a shortage is negligible. That's at least partly because despite this year's poor runoff, last year's runoff was well above normal, giving Lakes Mead and Powell breathing room to avoid cutbacks in deliveries to the states next year.

-- In 2020, the shortage risk is 52 percent. That's three percent higher than the bureau's most recent river forecast, made in January 2018.

-- In 2021, 2022 and 2023, the risk of any kind of shortage is 64, 68 and 65 percent, respectively. The most likely risk would be for what's known as a Tier 1 shortage, cutting back CAP deliveries by about 20 percent. Those cuts would mainly slice water supplies to Central Arizona Farmers and the Arizona Water Bank, a state program that recharges Colorado River water. Such a shortage will occur when Lake Mead drops below 1,075 feet at the end of a given year.

Cuts would likely also affect the Central Arizona Groundwater Replenishment District, a related agency to CAP that buys and recharges river water into the ground to compensate for groundwater pumping that serves new suburban development.

-- But starting in 2021, Arizona faces risks of more than 20 percent through 2023 of a more serious shortage, in which Lake Mead drops below 1,050 feet but is higher than 1,025 feet. In that situation, some deliveries would be cut back to cities and Indian tribes that now get supplies from a pool of water that once was set aside for agriculture but has since been given to some urban and tribal users. But Tucson Water and other Tucson-area CAP users wouldn't be affected by that cutback.

Lake Mead sat at nearly 1,085 feet elevation at the end of April. It's slated to decline to 1,079 feet by the end of December, three feet lower than it was at the end of 2017 but still four feet above the level at which a shortage would be declared.