

Jobs, Research At Risk After Government Defunds Grand Canyon Programs

The Colorado River that runs through Grand Canyon National Park supplies water to nearly forty million people in the West. But longstanding programs to protect the river's health are about to be defunded by the federal government. River managers say the result could be disastrous for the crown jewel of the national parks. KNAU's Melissa Sevigny reports.



The annual meeting of the Glen Canyon Dam Adaptive Management Program was anything but ordinary this year. It opened with the announcement that the entire program is about to vanish. The news came as a shock to a crowd of scientists, river runners, and residents of Flagstaff.

Lynn Hamilton, director of Grand Canyon River Guides, stood up to express her dismay: "This whole situation so greatly flabbergasts me, and disturbs me, as I'm sure it does all of you."

Flagstaff is a hub of Grand Canyon science. For two decades this program has

shaped the management of Glen Canyon Dam, finding ways to supply water and hydropower to millions of people, while still protecting the Grand Canyon's ecology. It's a landscape of cultural and spiritual significance.

Steve Wolff of Wyoming serves on the adaptive management committee. "I would say we're not completely sure what we're going to lose," he says. "It's uncharted territory for us."

Wolff says this program, and two others focused on endangered fish recovery in the Colorado River, are funded by hydropower revenues. The idea for decades has been that money generated by the river goes back to sustain the river's health. "Those hydropower funds basically have provided certainty... And all of the sudden they've been cut off from us," he says.

The White House Office of Management and Budget ordered 23 million dollars intended for the three programs to be redirected to the U.S. Treasury, starting October 1. The U.S. Department of the Interior was not consulted on the decision.

Wolff says the programs allow water projects in the Upper Colorado River Basin to operate without running afoul of the Endangered Species Act. He says, "We've had no litigation in 30 years in this basin on this issue, which to us is huge."

The programs also support scientific research on how dams affect the Colorado River's ecology. Jim DeVos of the Arizona Game and Fish Department says this work has gone on uninterrupted for decades. He says, "In the scheme of science that's a huge time frame, and the data we have is largely unprecedented in many areas. So it becomes a very serious issue."

DeVos says not only is the data at stake, so are people's jobs. "You're a scientist who has a house mortgage and all the fiscal things we have to deal with, and you start hearing, well, I might not have a job six months from now, it causes you some concern."

The Grand Canyon Monitoring and Research Center is a significant employer in Flagstaff. Under the new directive, the Center stands to lose its 10 million dollar budget and 60 employees. That funding also flows out to researchers at other institutions, like geologist Matt Kaplinski of Northern Arizona University. He's mapped sandbars in the Grand Canyon since 1990.

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Kaplinski says, "The potential elimination of funding, that's my livelihood. It's going to eliminate ten million dollars out of the local economy, it's the systematic destruction by this administration of our environmental policies. All of it is wrapped up in one big gut punch."

Kaplinski says these programs aren't just about meeting obligations under federal law. He says society has long held the belief that we should protect and learn from the Grand Canyon. He says, "If we can't take care of the Grand Canyon, how are we going to take care of the rest of the places in this country that are also amazing?"

Representatives of the seven Colorado River Basin states are fighting to restore the funds. The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation has promised to look for leftover money to keep some jobs and programs afloat after October 1. For now, scientists continue to work in the Grand Canyon under a cloud of uncertainty.

Which programs are affected?

- [The Upper Colorado River Endangered Fish Recovery Program](#) (1988)
- [The San Juan River Basin Recovery Implementation Program](#) (1992)

- [The Glen Canyon Dam Adaptive Management Program \(1997\)](#) and its science branch the [Grand Canyon Monitoring and Research Center](#) in Flagstaff.

What kind of scientific research is affected?

See KNAU's coverage of [high-flow experiments](#), [sandbar monitoring](#), [bug flows](#), [invasive species](#), and [endangered fish](#).