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Lawsuit Seeks to Include Climate Change in Glen Canyon Operations Plan

PRESCOTT, Ariz.— Three environmental groups launched a legal battle this week to force the required examination of climate change science in the federal management of Glen Canyon Dam and the Colorado River.

Save The Colorado, Center for Biological Diversity and Living Rivers filed a [lawsuit](#) in U.S. District Court in Prescott, Arizona, asserting that the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation and the Department of the Interior illegally ignored established climate science in their December 2016 Record of Decision on the Glen Canyon Dam Long-Term Experimental and Management Plan Final Environmental Impact Statement.

Since that decision, which functions as a 20-year operations plan for the dam, the federal government's management of the dam and the Colorado River has continued to ignore climate science and has relied on ineffective incremental solutions — such as the “drought contingency plan” — rather than the systemic change that is needed to protect the river in a climate-changed world.

The lawsuit alleges that the federal agencies failed to comply with federal law, specifically the National Environmental Policy Act. It demands that the agencies fix these shortcomings by redoing the alternatives analysis in the operations plan, including a full range of alternatives based on predicted climate change-related impacts on the flow of water in the Colorado River. Such a full range must include an alternative that incorporates the decommissioning and removal of Glen Canyon Dam because the projections from the best available climate science indicate there likely will not be sufficient flow in the Colorado River to keep Lake Powell and Glen Canyon Dam operational.

“Glen Canyon Dam's life is close to being over,” said Robin Silver, a cofounder of the Center for Biological Diversity. “It has no function anymore. Lake Powell dropped to within about 40 feet of the water level too low to produce power already this year. Dead pool is not too far behind. It is time that Bureau of Reclamation plans for the dam's removal.”

“The federal government violated the National Environmental Policy Act with their decision in 2016 and has continued to ignore climate science in Colorado River management,” said Gary Wockner, director of Save The Colorado, the lead co-plaintiff. “As we begin the 2020 water year, we must more seriously plan for the future, we must throw ‘incrementalism’ out of the toolbox, take climate science seriously, and plan for so-called ‘Black Swan’ drought events on the Colorado River.”

A Black Swan event is an outlier with severe consequences that has been overlooked by the standard process.

“Glen Canyon Dam is the dinosaur of the dam world,” said Dan Beard, former commissioner of the Bureau of Reclamation. “We need to prepare for unprecedented low-flow conditions on the Colorado River in the coming years that would drain Lake Powell. The time has come for the dam to be decommissioned and torn down.”

“One of my mentors, Eliot Porter, called Glen Canyon the ‘Place No One Knew,’” said John Fielder, a renowned Colorado nature photographer. “The best available climate science requires that the federal government prepare for the rebirth of Glen Canyon and the razing of Glen Canyon Dam.”

“Edward Abbey and his friends had it right, and climate science requires that their vision become real,” said Terry Odendahl, president and CEO of Global Greengrants Fund. “The federal government must prepare an alternative that includes the decommissioning of Glen Canyon Dam.”

The environmental groups are represented by clinical professors Tom Buchele and Jamie Saul of the [Earthrise Law Center at Lewis & Clark College School](#)

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