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Future of the Colorado River – Southwest Ag Summit

We conducted a session at the 2026 SW Ag Summit program on Thursday, 19 February regarding the future of the Colorado River and possible management plans for water allocations that will be very important for agriculture in the lower Colorado River Valley in the next decade. The program outline included the following speakers and components:

- Introduction – Jeff Silvertooth, Moderator, University of Arizona
- Colorado River Perspectives -
 - Clint Chandler, Deputy Director, Arizona Department of Water Resources
 - Vineetha Kartha, Colorado River Programs Manager – Central Arizona Project
 - Tina Shields, Water Manager at Imperial Irrigation District

All current conservation and operational guidelines expire in 2026. The Department of Interior (DoI) and the Bureau of Reclamation (BoR) set 11 November 2025 as a deadline for basin states (Figure 1) to come forth with an agreement and a new plan for conservation and river management. But the basin states could not come to an agreement, so the DoI extended the deadline to 14 February 2026, and the basin states failed to reach an agreement and meet that deadline.



Figure 1. Map of the Colorado River Basin and watershed. (Source: U.S. Bureau of Reclamation)

During the SW Ag Summit session prospects for a possible agreement among the Colorado River basin states were discussed. The Lower Basin (LB) states are unified in their efforts to find a common agreement and have offered numerous plans that include substantial conservation reductions on their part, but the Upper Basin (UB) states are unified in their direct opposition to any offers made by the LB and they refuse to make any reductions in their water allocations.

In January 2026, the Bureau of Reclamation BoR published the [Draft Environmental Impact Statement](#) (DEIS), which is required in the NEPA process. The DEIS includes five alternative approaches and analyses for consideration in the development of the new operating guidelines.

The five alternative approaches are listed below in very brief terms.

1. **No Action Alternative**—Included as a requirement of NEPA, this alternative reverts Colorado River operations to the decades-old operating framework that was in place prior

to the adoption of the 2007 Interim Guidelines for Lower Basin Shortages and Coordinated Operations for Lake Powell and Lake Mead.

2. **Basic Coordination Alternative**—This alternative is designed to achieve protection of critical infrastructure within the Department of the Interior and Bureau of Reclamation’s current statutory authorities if no new agreements among Basin water users are adopted.
3. **Enhanced Coordination Alternative**—This alternative was developed in coordination with the U.S. National Park Service and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, with input from Basin Tribes and the hydropower industry. It uses an approach of distributing storage between Lake Powell and Lake Mead that enhances the reservoirs’ ability to protect critical infrastructure and support the Colorado River Basin.
4. **Maximum Operational Flexibility Alternative**—This alternative was developed by a consortium of conservation organizations with the goals of stabilizing system storage, integrating stewardship and mitigation strategies for Lake Powell and Lake Mead, maintaining opportunities for binational cooperative measures, incentivizing water conservation, and designing flexible water management strategies. It uses both system storage and recent hydrology for determining annual releases from Lake Powell and Lake Mead. Additionally, it introduces the Conservation Reserve as a flexible tool for water conservation and management.
5. **Supply Driven Alternative**—This alternative proposes that Lake Powell operation be based solely on historical natural flow. It incorporates concepts from the separate proposals submitted by the Upper and Lower Basin States, as well as ideas emerging from discussions with the Basin States during spring 2025. In this alternative, annual Lake Powell releases would be determined based on a set percentage of the preceding three-year average natural flow, and Lower Basin deliveries would be determined based on Lake Mead elevation.

A lot of attention at our SW Ag Summit session was directed at a review and consideration of the five alternatives presented in the DEIS. Figure 2, which describes LB and UB reductions associated with each of the DEIS alternatives plus two others (continued current strategies and supply driven pro-rata), was presented and reviewed. It is important to note the significant reductions from each alternative on the LB allocations while the UB is not subject to any reductions.

Maximum Policy Shortage in Each Basin for each Alternative

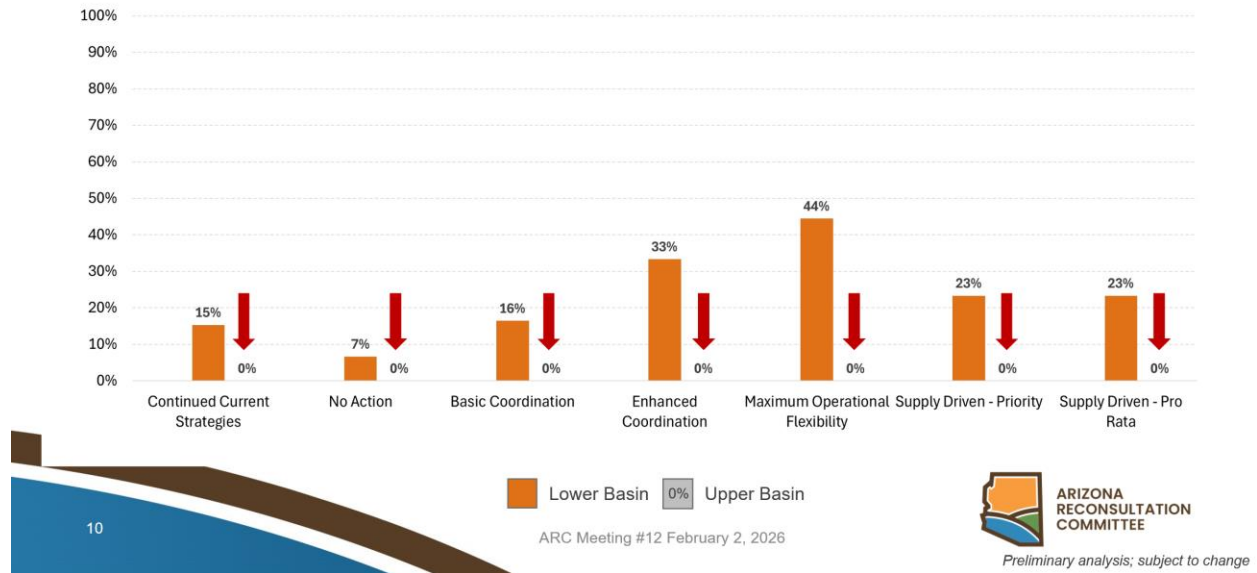


Figure 2. Maximum shortages for the Lower and Upper Basins for a series of possible alternatives. (source: Arizona Reconsultation Committee)

The possible impacts from the DEIS alternatives being considered are both interesting and puzzling considering the contrasting UB and LB facts (Figure 3). Some of the basic facts associated with the economic impact of the use of the Colorado River water include:

- 75% of economic productivity from the river is associated with the lower basin.
- 75% of the 40 M people supported by the waters of the Colorado River reside in the LB as well as 74% of the jobs.
- 78% of the total crop sales derived from the irrigation with Colorado River water is from the LB.
- Agriculture in the LB is substantially more efficient, economically (based on agricultural sales) and agronomically (crop yields and productivity per unit of water utilized), than the UB.

The UB states have never utilized their complete allocation of 7.5 MAF of Colorado River water while the LB has consistently utilized their 7.5 MAF and put it to good work (Figure 3). Yet the UB states have been insistent on not making reductions on their part and insisting that all future reductions come the LB.

A huge amount of infrastructure has been developed in the LB in the past 100 years to facilitate the development and productivity described in Figure 3, all in partnership with the United States via the DoI and BoR, Good examples include: the Boulder, Glen Canyon, Parker, Davis, Palo Verde Diversion, and the Imperial Dams as well as the Colorado River Aqueduct and the Central Arizona Project. In review of the DEIS, the proposed alternatives do not seem consistent with the historical precedent established by the DoI and BoR in recognizing the value of the Colorado River in the LB.

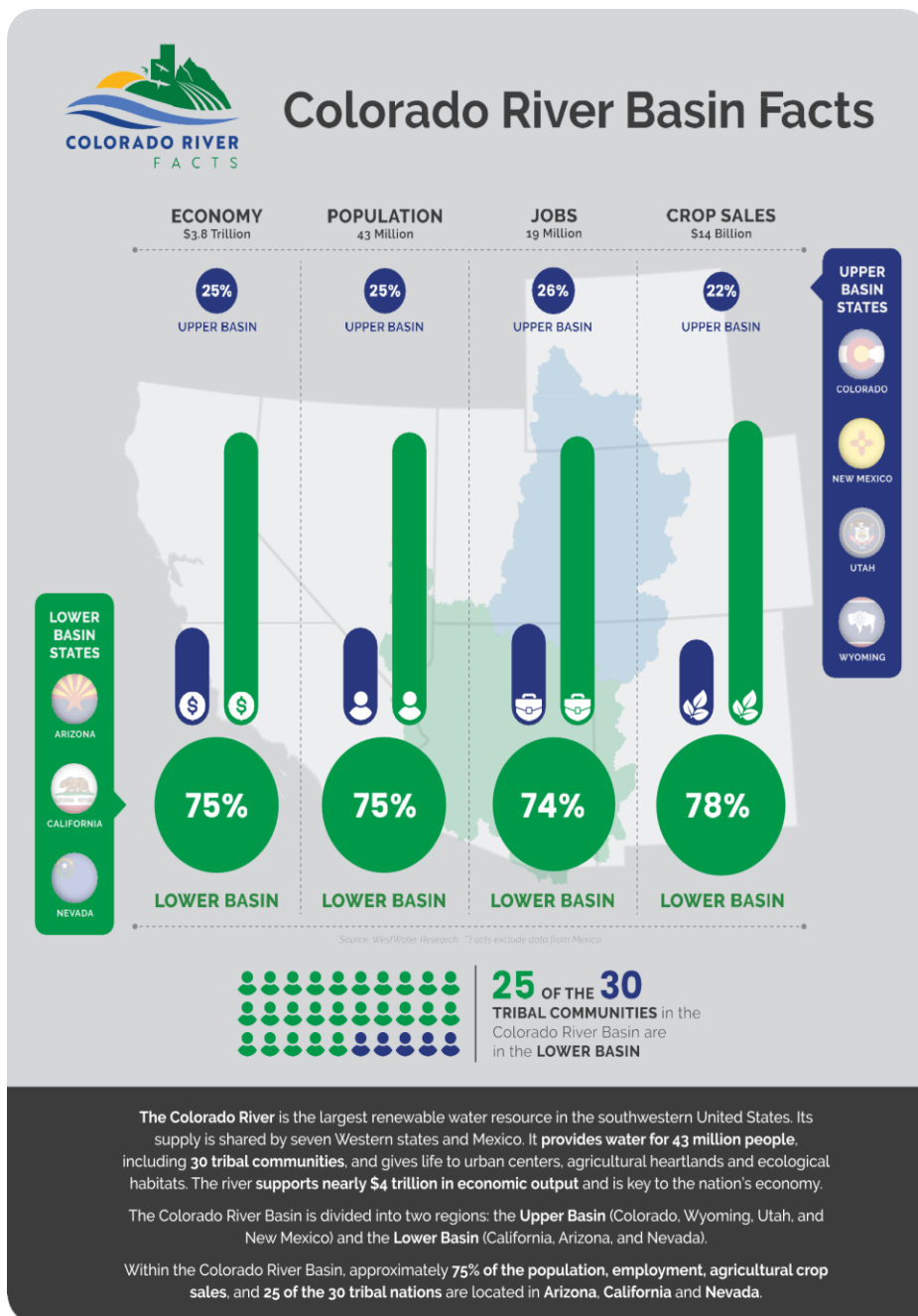


Figure 3. Some basic Colorado River basin facts. (Source: Coalition for Protecting Arizona’s Lifeline, Colorado River Facts. <https://protectingarizonaslifeline.com/members/>)

Public input is critical to shape long-term water management for Lake Mead and Lake Powell. Comments have been openly solicited from citizens on the DoI DEIS for Post-2026 Colorado River operations via email to crbpost2026@usbr.gov. The deadline was 2 March 2026. However, most of the deadlines imposed by the DoI and BoR for proposals from the basin states have passed without consequence, so perhaps they will extend the period for public comments as well.

The DEIS proposed alternatives can be accessed at the [Bureau of Reclamation website](#). Also, a Web Tool has been developed to help explore and understand different operational strategies: [Post-2026 Operations Exploration Web Tool](#).

Given an opportunity, it is also important to attend meetings hosted by the BoR, which are designed to provide information and collect public input.

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