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U.S. Department of the Interior and Western municipal water suppliers reach landmark collaborative agreement

Colorado River basin municipalities and federal government join forces for greater water security

In support of the Colorado River basin states drought contingency planning to address a long-term imbalance on the Colorado River caused by years of drought conditions, municipal water providers in Arizona, California, Nevada and Colorado and the federal government signed a landmark water conservation agreement this week called the Colorado River System Conservation program.

Central Arizona Project, Denver Water, The Metropolitan Water District of Southern California and Southern Nevada Water Authority are partnering with the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation to contribute \$11 million to fund pilot Colorado River water conservation projects. The projects will demonstrate the viability of cooperative, voluntary compensated measures for reducing water demand in a variety of areas, including agricultural, municipal and industrial uses.

For more than a decade, a severe drought — one of the worst in the last 1,200 years — has gripped the Colorado River, causing the world’s most extensive storage reservoir system to come closer and closer to critically low water levels. The Colorado River and its tributaries provide water to nearly 40 million people for municipal use, and the combined metropolitan areas served by the Colorado River represent the world’s 12th largest economy, generating more than \$1.7 trillion in Gross Metropolitan Product per year along with agricultural economic benefits of just under \$5 billion annually.

“This is a critically important first step, and I applaud the far sighted municipal water providers for beginning to address the imbalance in supply and demand on the Colorado River that could seriously affect the economy and the people who rely upon the river,” said U.S. Deputy Secretary of the Interior Mike Connor. “There is still much work to be done, and the Interior Department is committed to supporting the efforts of the Colorado River Basin States and other stakeholders as partners in improving water management and operations, particularly during this historic drought.”

“This situation is becoming increasingly critical. We are already dealing with unprecedented pressure on the southern California region’s water system,” said Jeffrey Kightlinger, general manager for The Metropolitan Water District of Southern California. “This innovative program is aimed at expanding conservation efforts from a local level to a collaborative system-wide program.”

Without collaborative action now, water supplies, hydropower production, water quality, agricultural output and recreation and environmental resources are all at risk, in both the upper and lower basins.

"This agreement represents a unique approach to save water and protect the Colorado River system from the impacts of the on-going drought and the current imbalance between supplies and demands in the Basin," said Central Arizona Project Board President Pam Pickard. "It is an important milestone in interstate collaboration, with CAP working with partners in California, Nevada, Colorado and the federal government to improve the health of the Colorado River."

All water conserved under this program will stay in the river, helping to boost the declining reservoir levels and benefiting the health of the entire river system.

"Half of Denver's water supply comes from the Colorado River, so we have a direct interest in the health of the entire system," said Jim Lochhead, Denver Water CEO. "This is a proactive contingency plan for drought years to help secure our water supply future with a balanced, economic and environmental approach. This is clearly the right thing to do for our customers, our future water supply and the basin."

The Colorado River System Conservation program will provide funding for pilot conservation programs in 2015 and 2016. Successful programs can be expanded or extended to provide even greater protection for the Colorado River system.

"The time has come for our states to work together to develop contingency strategies to manage the Colorado River under extreme drought conditions that threaten the levels of Lakes Mead and Powell," said John Entsminger, general manager for the Southern Nevada Water Authority. "As Lake Mead continues to drop toward critical levels, we must simultaneously begin to take collective action now and plan additional future measures."

In order to ensure that local concerns are addressed, and that there is equity and fairness among all parties, in the Lower Colorado River Basin, the Bureau of Reclamation will manage the conservation actions in Arizona, California and Nevada in a manner consistent with past programs, while in the Upper Basin, the Upper Basin states of Colorado, New Mexico, Utah and Wyoming, and the Upper Colorado River Commission will have a direct role in program efforts.

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