



## Drought Contingency Planning in the West?

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Concern over the adequacy of future water supplies has moved into the limelight here in Colorado and throughout the west. Population growth-related demand for water along with overuse and several years of below average precipitation in the southwestern U.S. have progressively taken their toll on our country’s two largest reservoirs. Water stored in Colorado River reservoirs is now at the lowest volume in over a half-century based on US Bureau of Reclamation data.

In 2000, both Lake Powell in Southern Utah and Lake Mead near Las Vegas were full. Water levels in both reservoirs have generally been in decline ever since. Currently, the two reservoirs are about 40 percent full.

Forty million people and 5.5 million acres of irrigated agricultural land rely on the Colorado River Basin. Trans-mountain diversions mean some of those people and acres are located outside of the Colorado River Basin – along Colorado’s Front Range and eastward down the South Platte and Arkansas River Basins. The river and its tributaries and related wetlands also provide an oasis for aquatic life, wildlife and birds.

The declining reservoir levels have spurred drought contingency planning (DCP) within the upper and lower basin states. Since 2000, the Upper Colorado River Basin has experienced the driest 18 year period in the 113 years of record keeping on the Colorado. The DCP is intended to proactively plan for a range of water supply conditions and prevent curtailment to upper basin water users.

The upper basin states – which include Colorado, Wyoming, Utah and New Mexico – completed their Drought Contingency Plans (DCP) in December. Two of the lower basin states – California and Nevada, also completed their drought contingency plans well ahead of a January 31, 2019 deadline set by the Bureau of Reclamation. Shortly before the deadline expired, the governor of Arizona authorized the director of the Arizona Department of Water Resources to execute relevant interstate DCP agreements. However, this did not represent the completion of a drought contingency plan.

On February 1, 2019, the Bureau of Reclamation issued a request for formal input from the seven Colorado River Basin states’ governors that would help reduce the risk of Colorado River reservoirs declining to critically low levels. Specifically, the Bureau of Reclamation (BoR) asked for recommendations for potential actions by the Department of the Interior to reduce the risks of lakes Powell and Mead declining to critically low levels. Comments received from the governors will be shared with the public.

Sources:

[https://www.usbr.gov/lc/region/g4000/lakemead\\_line.pdf](https://www.usbr.gov/lc/region/g4000/lakemead_line.pdf)

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