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California and other states tout new Colorado River water-saving plan - Los Angeles Times

By Ian James
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- California, Arizona and Nevada announced a new water-saving plan to help address worsening shortages along the Colorado River over the next two years.
- Representatives of seven states have deadlocked in negotiations on a long-term plan to take less from the shrinking river.

With the Colorado River's giant reservoirs declining toward critically low levels, negotiators for California, Arizona and Nevada announced a new water-saving plan for the next two years.

Representatives of the three states said in a written statement Friday night that their plan aims to "stabilize the Colorado River through 2028." It will require larger cuts in water use than they had pledged previously in talks with other states and the federal government.

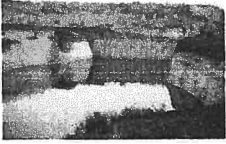
"We have stepped up to establish a leadership position to protect the system for another two years," said JB Hamby, the chairman of California's Colorado River Board. "Without that, the system will continue to decline."

The three states' negotiators said their plan identifies more than 3.2 million acre-feet of water cutbacks through 2028, building on their previous proposal.

Representatives of the three states negotiated the short-term deal after they deadlocked in talks with four other states on a long-term plan for sharing the river's diminishing water.

Lake Mead, the country's largest reservoir near Las Vegas, is now 31% full.

And upstream on the Arizona-Utah border, Lake Powell is just 24% full. In the coming year, the reservoir could decline to a point where water can no longer pass through intakes to generate hydroelectric power.

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The Colorado River provides water for about 35 million people and 5 million acres of farmland, from the Rocky Mountains to northern Mexico. The water was originally divided among the states in 1922 under an agreement called the Colorado River Compact.

The river flow has shrunk dramatically since 2000, and research has shown that global warming is intensifying the dry conditions.

This year, the snowpack in the upper portion of the river's watershed in the Rocky Mountains measures just 22% of average, the smallest on record. That will translate into very little runoff reaching the river's depleted reservoirs this year.

In a letter to Interior Department officials, the states' top negotiators said they came up with the three-state plan because "quick and decisive action is urgently required."

"We hope these actions can provide additional time to develop a longer-term approach involving actions to achieve reductions in use by all seven states," they said.

The plan calls for reducing California's use of Colorado River water by about 13% in 2027 and 2028. Arizona and Nevada agreed to larger cutbacks.

Managers of various water agencies still need to negotiate the specifics of how the water cuts will be divided between cities and farming areas.



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Stepped-up conservation by growers will be key, as about three-fourths of the river's water is used for agriculture, producing crops such as hay for cattle and vegetables like lettuce and broccoli.

Over the last three years, the states have turned to voluntary water cutbacks and federal payments to farmers who agree to leave fields dry part of the year.

State leaders have urged the Trump administration to provide money to support conservation efforts. California Gov. Gavin Newsom, along with governors of the other six states, stressed this in a joint letter to Interior Secretary Doug Burgum on Thursday, saying “solutions will require significant federal funding to match our state investments.”

The negotiators for California, Arizona and Nevada reiterated that, saying the water-saving plan is “contingent on the availability of federal and other funding.”

They said they plan to work out the specifics of the water cuts by August.

Over the last five years, cities across Southern California have received nearly one-fourth of their water from the Colorado River. In California's Imperial Valley, farms depend entirely on the Colorado River.

Shivaji Deshmukh, general manager of the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, said it's unfortunate that all seven states have not been able to reach an

agreement.

He said the three states' plan "aims to address the historically dry conditions in the near term." At the same time, he said there is still hope that "an agreement can be reached in the next year among the seven states for broad conservation programs."

"We must recognize that the river is changing," Deshmukh said, "and the only way we can ensure the communities, businesses and ecosystems across the Southwest have the water they need in the decades to come is by all seven states working together."

The Metropolitan Water District, which delivers water to 19 million people, currently has ample water coming from Northern California and stored in reservoirs, so there are no immediate plans for extra water-saving measures in the region this summer.

The Las Vegas area has already saved so much water over the last two decades that it's surpassed its latest water-saving pledge, said John Entsminger, general manager of the Southern Nevada Water Authority. The area has dramatically reduced water use by targeting the removal of water-guzzling lawns and adopting other water-saving rules.

"This isn't a situation that's snuck up on Las Vegas," Entsminger said. "We spent 25 years driving down our water usage and being the most efficient urban area in the United States."

Entsminger said he went into the negotiations two and a half years ago hopeful that the seven states could agree on a long-term plan for the next 30 years. Since that hasn't yet been possible, he said, the short-term deal "buys us time."

In their letter to the federal government, the negotiators for California, Arizona and Nevada said those representing the upstream states — Colorado, Utah, Wyoming and New Mexico — have so far refused to commit to mandatory reductions.

They said they hope the latest proposal can help the seven states eventually agree on a long-term approach.

“Everybody has to be more efficient and use less water,” Entsminger said.

By committing to conserve more, the three states are offering “a bit of an olive branch” to the other states, he said, to show how the region can reach a consensus on living within the river’s limits.

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