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INSIGHT

Responding to Drought in the Colorado River Basin

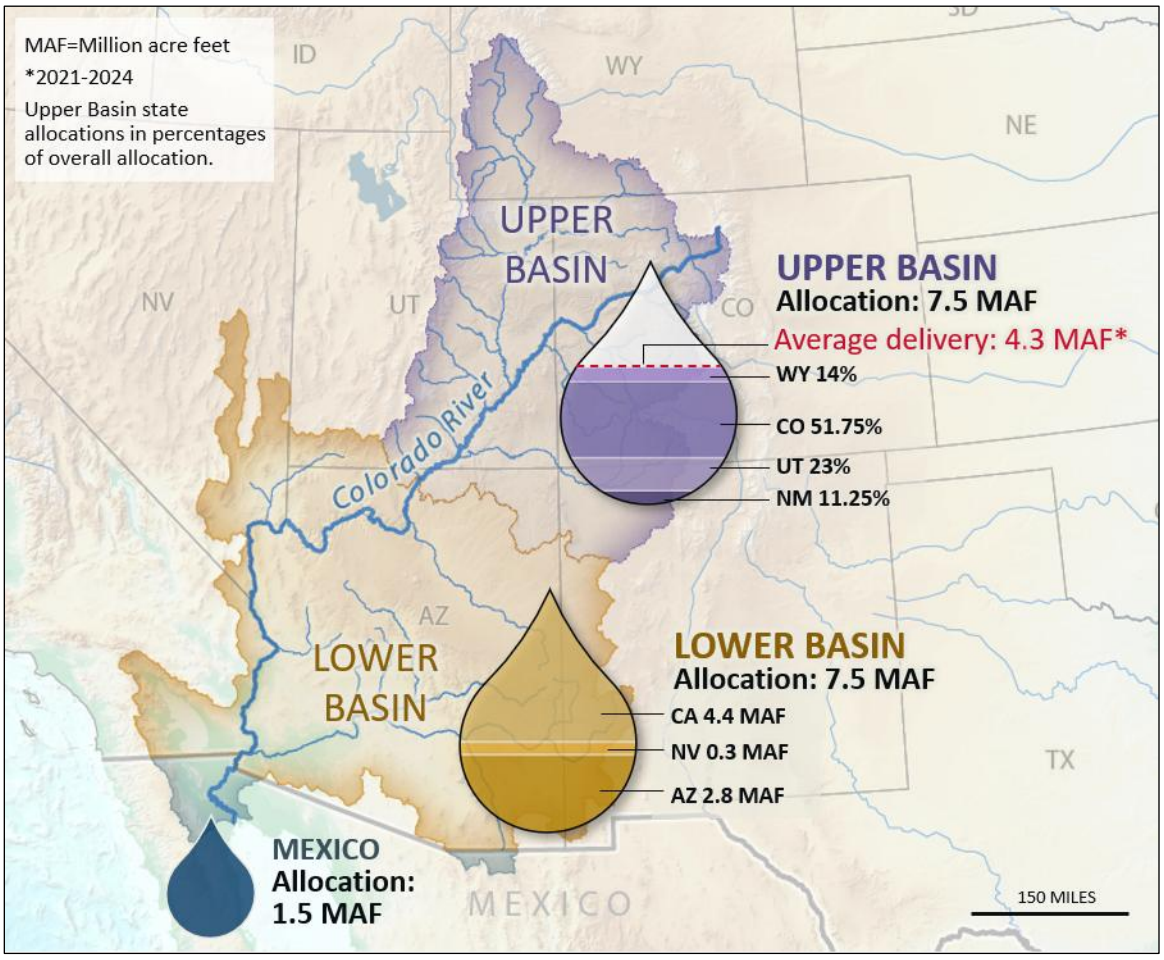
Updated November 17, 2026

The Colorado River Basin covers more than 246,000 square miles in seven U.S. states and Mexico. Basin waters are governed by multiple documents, known collectively as the *Law of the River*. The Colorado River Compact of 1922 established the framework to apportion water supplies between the river's Upper and Lower Basins, with each basin allocated 7.5 million acre-feet (MAF) annually; a subsequent agreement also provided for releases to Mexico (**Figure 1**). The Bureau of Reclamation (Reclamation) plays a prominent role in basin water management due to the many congressionally authorized projects in the basin.

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IN11982

Figure 1. Colorado River Basin Allocations

(allocations in MAF)



Source: CRS, using data from U.S. Geological Survey Esri Data & Maps, 2017, Central Arizona Project, and Esri World Shaded Relief Map.

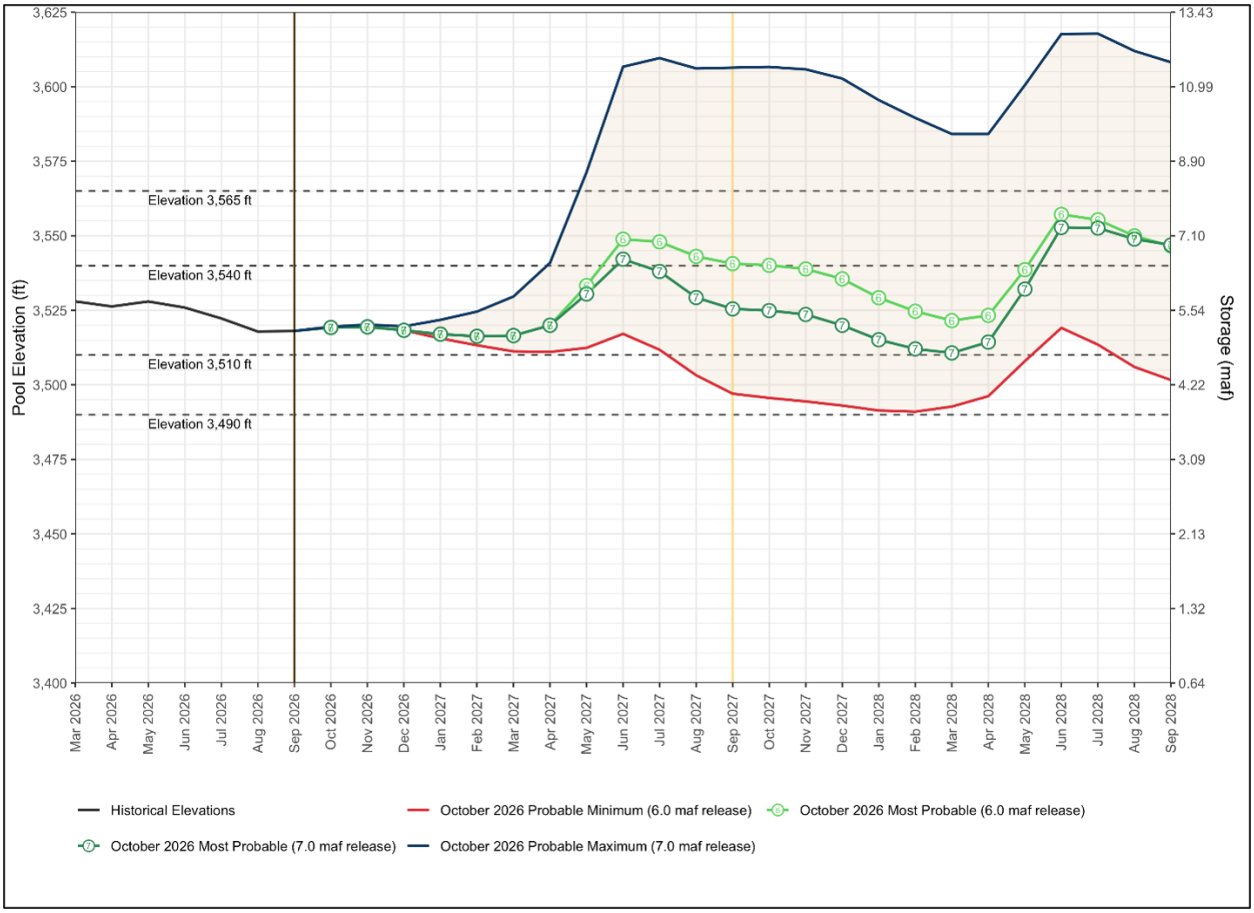
Notes: Due to uncertainty about how much water remains after meeting obligations to the Lower Basin and Mexico, most Upper Basin compact apportionments are in terms of percentages. 2021-2024 is the most recent reporting available for Upper Basin deliveries.

When federal and state governments approved the compact, they assumed that river flows would average 16.4 MAF/year. Actual annual flows from 1906 to 2024 were approximately 14.6 MAF and averaged less (12.4 MAF) from 2000 through 2024. Demand has exceeded these amounts in most years, and studies project lower flows in the future.

The imbalance between water supplies and demand has depleted storage in the basin's two largest reservoirs—Lake Powell and Lake Mead—and threatens water supplies for millions in the Southwest. In summer 2026, storage at these reservoirs fell to historically low levels, and it remains critically low. Reclamation makes operational decisions for basin reservoirs based on 24-month studies, which project future conditions (**Figure 2**, **Figure 3**).

Figure 2. Lake Powell Storage Elevations and Projections

(October 2026 inflow scenarios)

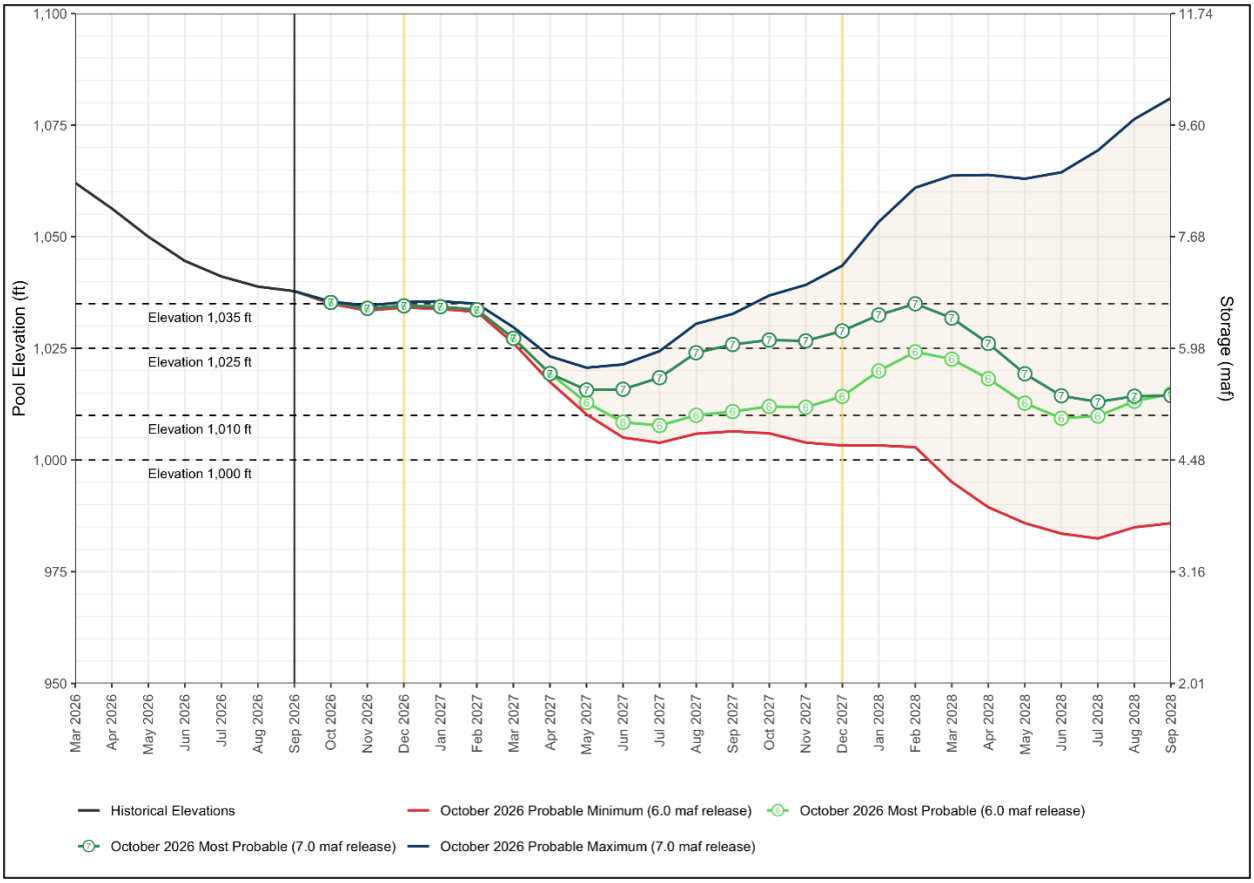


Source: Bureau of Reclamation, "24-Month Study Projections."

Notes: ft = feet; maf = million acre-feet.

Figure 3. Lake Mead Storage Elevations and Projections

(October 2026 inflow scenarios)



Source: Bureau of Reclamation, "24-Month Study Projections."

Notes: ft = feet; maf = million acre-feet.

Mitigating Drought in the Colorado River Basin

Previous efforts to improve the basin's water supply outlook resulted in 2003, 2007, 2019, and 2024 agreements that tied Lower Basin delivery reductions to Lake Mead levels and coordinated Upper Basin operations to protect Lake Powell from critically low levels. Pursuant to those agreements, Reclamation has previously curtailed water deliveries to Arizona and Nevada based on Lake Mead levels, and some Lower Basin users have also conserved water on a voluntary basis in exchange for federally compensated water delivery reductions approved in P.L. 117-169 (popularly known as the Inflation Reduction Act, or IRA). Reclamation also moved Upper Basin waters from upstream reservoirs to Lake Powell in 2021, 2022, and 2026. However, some studies estimate that reductions of 2.4-3.2 MAF/year are needed to stabilize the system in the long term.

Post-2026 Operations

Beginning in 2022, Reclamation undertook an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) study process analyzing long-term (post-2026) operational alternatives for the system. In 2024, Upper and Lower Basin states submitted competing operational plans to Reclamation. The Lower Basin proposed cuts in both basins and tied Lake Powell releases to system storage and Upper Basin consumption, among other

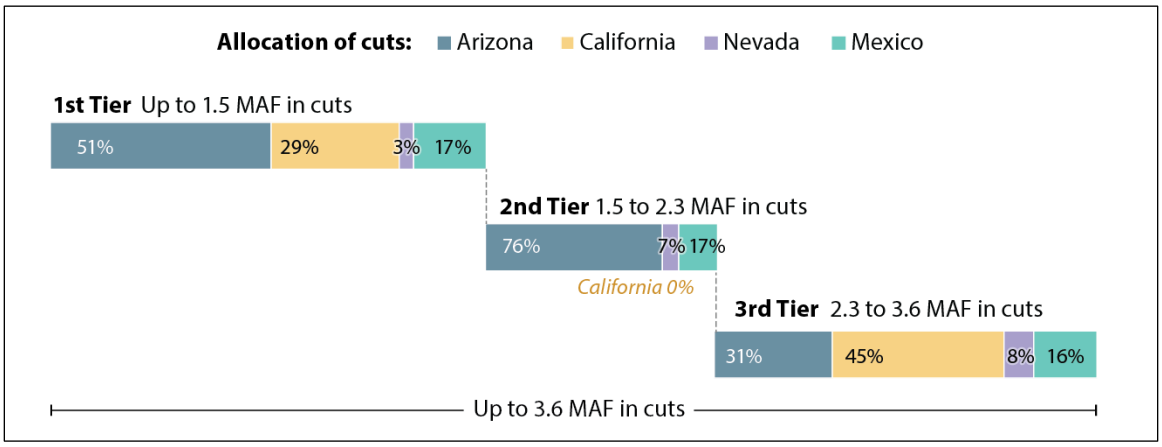
things. The Upper Basin proposed additional Lower Basin cuts, no mandatory cuts for its users, and no major changes to the basis for Lake Powell releases.

Reclamation announced its preferred alternative in a Final EIS in July 2026 and finalized it in a Record of Decision (ROD). Reclamation stipulated that going forward the basin would be operated in two-year intervals; it detailed plans for the next two years in a 2027-2028 Operations Plan.

Lower Basin states are subject to new delivery reductions pursuant to the 2026 ROD. Reclamation's preferred alternative distributes shortages in three potential tiers (**Figure 4**): The first 1.5 MAF in shortages require Lower Basin state delivery reductions of 1.25 MAF/year, distributed based on a previous 2026-2028 Lower Basin proposal. Under the ROD, Reclamation will reduce deliveries further if Lake Mead drops to critically low levels, with different distributions of cuts assumed for reductions tiers of 1.5 to 2.3 MAF/year and 2.3 to 3.6 MAF/year, respectively. The latter reductions would be implemented based on existing water rights priorities. Maximum cumulative annual shortages for Lower Basin states for all tiers combined under the preferred alternative could reach as high as 1.79 MAF/year for Arizona, 1.01 MAF/year for California, 206,670 AF/year for Nevada, and 599,694 AF/year for Mexico.

Figure 4. 2027-2028 Lower Basin Cuts Under 2026 ROD

(distribution of annual delivery shortage volumes for U.S. States and Mexico)



Source: CRS, based on Bureau of Reclamation, *Post-2026 Operational Guidelines and Strategies for Lake Powell and Lake Mead,* Final Environmental Impact Statement, https://www.usbr.gov/ColoradoRiverBasin/post2026/final-eis/index.html.

Notes: ROD= Record of Decision; MAF = million acre-feet. Shortages are tied to Lake Mead elevation, as outlined in Reclamation's FEIS. The FEIS assumes Mexico cuts that have yet to be negotiated/announced.

The ROD finalized other operational elements, including allowing for annual releases from Glen Canyon Dam as low as 5.0 MAF/year if Lake Powell is projected to decline below 3,500 feet. It also provides for releases from other federal reservoirs in the Upper Basin to protect Glen Canyon Dam infrastructure, assumes voluntary conservation of 200,000 AF/year from the Upper Basin, and allows for additional conserved Lower Basin waters to be stored in Lake Mead, among other things.

Some parts of Reclamation's plan will require nonfederal approvals to implement, and it is unclear what new federal authorities may be required to implement specific elements of the preferred alternative. While states and some Members of Congress have called for new federal funding to mitigate the effect of water delivery reductions on users, no such funding has been enacted.

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