



The Metropolitan Water District of Southern California

NEWS RELEASE

P. O. Box 54153, Los Angeles, California 90054-0153 • (213) 217-6485 • www.mwdh2o.com

Contacts: Rebecca Kimitch, (213) 217-6450; (202) 821-5253, mobile
Maritza Fairfield, (213) 217-6853; (909) 816-7722, mobile

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METROPOLITAN BOARD APPROVES DROUGHT CONTINGENCY PLAN TO KEEP COLORADO RIVER SUPPLIES FLOWING TO SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

Facing the impending threat of Colorado River reservoirs reaching critically low levels, the board of directors of the Metropolitan Water District today approved a sweeping plan among seven states to ensure the river will continue to provide a reliable supply of water to Southern California and the Southwest in the coming decade.

The Colorado River is a crucial supply for cities and farms across the Southwest, providing about 25 percent of the water used in the Southland. Nearly 20 years of drought, climate change and growing demands have caused river flows and storage levels in the system's two largest reservoirs – Lake Mead and Lake Powell – to drop dramatically.

The Drought Contingency Plan approved today by Metropolitan is an effort by the basin states that rely on the river to keep the reservoirs from reaching critically low levels that would trigger severe delivery cuts, threaten power generation at Hoover and Parker dams, and prevent Metropolitan from accessing conserved water it has stored in Lake Mead.

“Without action, it is not a matter of if, but when Lake Mead will drop so low that all its users will be harmed,” board Chairman Randy Record said. “We simply can’t allow that to happen. This supply is too important to the people, farms and businesses of Southern California and the nation. We have been working for more than three years across sectors and states to negotiate this solution.”

Under the plan, which still needs approval from several agencies and Congress, the Lower Colorado River Basin states of California, Arizona and Nevada agree to store defined volumes of water in Lake Mead, largely through conservation, if the lake reaches certain levels.

California would make storage contributions if Lake Mead's elevation drops to 1,045 feet above sea level, 33 feet below its current level of 1,078. Those contributions – 200,000-350,000 acre-feet a year – would be shared by Metropolitan, Palo Verde Irrigation District, Imperial Irrigation District and Coachella Valley Water District.

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Arizona and Nevada, which have lower priority rights to Colorado River water, would begin making storage contributions immediately. If Lake Mead's level recovers, much of the storage contributions would be returned to each agency. (An acre foot of water is nearly 326,000 gallons, about the amount used by three typical Southern California households a year.)

For the Upper Colorado River Basin states of Wyoming, Colorado, Utah and New Mexico, the DCP establishes tools already used in the Lower Basin, including water banking and reservoir management, to maintain higher levels in Lake Powell.

The DCP builds on a 2007 agreement, negotiated when the Colorado River was in its seventh year of drought, which attempted to address declining Mead and Powell reservoir levels. The drought has since stretched into its 18th year, and conditions have deteriorated far more than anticipated in 2007. According to the Bureau of Reclamation, the risk of Lake Mead reaching critically low elevations has increased from 10 percent then to more than 45 percent today, requiring the additional actions.

Still, the DCP and the 2007 agreement do not solve all the challenges on the Colorado River, explained Metropolitan General Manager Jeffrey Kightlinger. In effect through 2026, the DCP is a bridge solution that allows the seven Basin states and Mexico, which also relies on Colorado River water, to negotiate long-term management of the river.

“This is a tourniquet. It is a very proactive approach that buys us about a decade. But climate change is exacerbating the existing problems of drought and overuse in the Lower Basin. Increased temperatures, decreased snowfall and reduced run-off – those challenges are only getting worse,” Kightlinger said. “We have 40 million people, 5 million acres of farmland and diverse ecosystems that are relying on the success of this river. The real work is just beginning.”

In addition to Metropolitan, the DCP has already been approved by Wyoming, Colorado, New Mexico, Utah and necessary agencies in Nevada. It still needs approval from Arizona, Congress and several other water agencies.

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The Metropolitan Water District of Southern California is a state-established cooperative that, along with its 26 cities and retail suppliers, provide water for nearly 19 million people in six counties. The district imports water from the Colorado River and Northern California to supplement local supplies, and helps its members to develop increased water conservation, recycling, storage and other resource-management programs.