

## Western Water Coverage

Throughout the history of the American West, water issues have shown their ability to both unite and divide communities. As an imbalance between water supplies and demands grows in the region, KUNC is committed to covering the stories that emerge.

# Western lawmakers form caucus to talk Colorado River in congress

KUNC | By [Alex Hager](#)

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Members of Congress from six of the seven states that use Colorado River water are convening a new caucus. The group aims to help rally federal funding for water projects along a river that supplies 40 million people and is shrinking due to climate change.

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The House of Representatives caucus was formed as the Southwest grapples with a growing supply-demand imbalance along the vital river. Tension is growing between the states and industries that depend on the Colorado River, as reserves are steadily depleted by growing cities and a multibillion-dollar agriculture industry.

Joe Neguse, a Colorado Democrat and founding member of the caucus, said the group was formed to encourage dialogue between representatives from different states and to advocate for the allocation of government money for Colorado River projects. Neguse said the group will not aim to make decisions about how water is allocated, a process typically left to the states.

“There's more to be done and it's going to require a Herculean investment by the federal government,” Neguse said. “The hope is that Upper Basin and Lower Basin states teaming up in the way that we have proposed will pack more of a punch in terms of being able to secure those federal dollars that we know are really necessary to help with some of the water shortages that we're already experiencing.”

Neguse said the caucus has not yet met, but intends to convene “in the coming weeks.”

“Any way we can help coordinate among the states and different entities is pretty welcome at this point,” said Elizabeth Koebele, an associate professor of political science at the University of Nevada, Reno.

Koebele said the geography and ideology of the Colorado River basin makes it hard to have centralized rulemaking.

“I don't think we're ever going to get that kind of a top-down river governance structure. I think these are kind of formalized channels between different levels of governance, and that's really important for dealing with these moments of high water stress in the basin,” Koebele said.

The Biden Administration has [already allocated](#) billions of dollars to water conservation projects in the Colorado River basin. The Inflation Reduction Act sent \$4 billion to the Bureau of Reclamation, the federal agency which manages the West's dams and reservoirs—the bulk of that was designated for projects along the Colorado River. So far, the centerpieces of that spending are programs that would [pay farmers and ranchers](#) to



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Sen. John Hickenlooper (left) and Rep. Joe Neguse speak with Interior Secretary Deb Haaland in Boulder County, Colorado on April 11, 2022. Both are members of caucuses designed to rally conversation and federal funding around the Colorado River.

State water leaders have engaged in [increasingly-public](#) squabbles about who should give up water to help prop up shrinking reservoirs. Those tiffs often pit the Upper Basin states—Colorado, Utah, Wyoming and New Mexico—against their Lower Basin counterparts—California, Arizona and Nevada.

“I think that discord or disagreement, if you will, and divergence in priorities is largely at the state level,” Neguse said.

Wyoming is the lone state not represented in the caucus. The state, which uses the third-smallest amount of water from the Colorado River, has only one seat in congress. The current representative is Harriet Hageman, a Republican who took office in January 2023.

“We’ve been in touch with their office,” Neguse said. “I’m hopeful that we will have her participation in the coming months.”

The announcement of a House caucus comes shortly after news of a [similar group](#) dedicated to river matters that recently formed in the Senate. Colorado Democratic Sen. John Hickenlooper spearheaded the informal group of lawmakers that has been meeting for about a year, apparently with similar goals to the group led by Neguse.

Koehle, the political science professor, said this caucus may be “priming the pump” for

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In 2026, the current guidelines for managing the river expire and states are expected to replace them with a new set of rules. After that, Koebele said management decisions could require congressional approval.

“These kinds of collective decision bodies provide some political cover for the states,” she said. “Maybe if it's this congressional caucus telling (the Department of the) Interior that they're hearing from the states that this is a really urgent problem, and that we really need to have a move made on this, maybe that is kind of a new pressure. I don't want to see it force Interior to do something, but maybe kind of heighten the salience of the issue.”

*This story is part of ongoing coverage of the Colorado River, produced by KUNC, and supported by the Walton Family Foundation.*

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