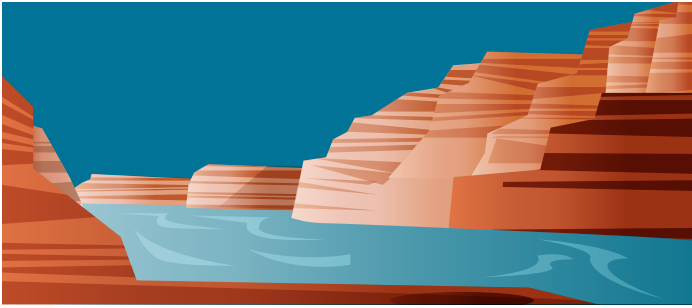


Future Colorado River Operations



BUREAU OF
RECLAMATION



For the past 26 years, the Colorado River Basin (Basin) has been experiencing an unprecedented drought, resulting in historically low runoff and reservoir levels. After a record-low snowpack during the winter of 2025-2026, the combined storage in Lake Powell and Lake Mead is lower than it has been since before Lake Powell began filling in 1963. Lake Mead and Lake Powell also reached record-low elevations in August 2026. Several of the major reservoir and water management documents and agreements that guide Colorado River operations expire in 2026, and in 2022 the Department of the Interior (Department) began engaging the Basin States, Basin Tribes, partner Federal agencies and other interested parties in pursuit of new consensus-based long-term operating guidelines. Unfortunately, consensus on long-term operations has not been reached. Instead, a 2-year interval pursuant to a 10-year Decision Framework will be implemented by October 1, 2026.

2027–2028 Operating Guidelines

The Department is issuing 2027-2028 Operating Guidelines that will provide guidance for the next two years. The Operating Guidelines are a final agency action issued pursuant to the Record of Decision (ROD). They were developed after extensive engagement with the seven Basin States and incorporate concepts from proposals from both the Upper and Lower Basin States and Basin Tribes. ***The Operating Guidelines are designed to provide certainty regarding Lower Basin water use for 2027 and 2028 and adopt an operation at Lake Powell that is both protective and provides sufficient operational flexibility to respond to rapidly changing hydrologic conditions.***

As summarized on page 2, the 2027-2028 Operating Guidelines consist of objective criteria for Lake Powell operations, incorporation of the utilization of the Colorado River Storage Project (CRSP) Upper Initial Units (specific reservoirs above Lake Powell), and Lake Mead operations.

Record of Decision (10-year Decision Framework)

The Decision Framework establishes the **operational principles, sideboards** (key thresholds and ranges for operational elements), and **process** that will support development and issuance of Operating Guidelines through 2036. The Operating Guidelines, or the objective criteria that will govern operations at Lake Powell and Lake Mead, are anticipated to cover 2-year intervals unless consensus-based agreements provide for a longer duration. The 2027–2028 Operating Guidelines are the first set of guidelines issued pursuant to the ROD. Subsequent Operating Guidelines will also be issued pursuant to the ROD, as final agency actions, subject to environmental compliance, and published in the Federal Register.

The Decision Framework operational principles guiding development of Operating Guidelines address the key issues of future hydrology, protection of critical Federal infrastructure, relationship to existing law, and the priority of developing and implementing consensus agreements in future operations. The operational sideboards provide boundaries for the range of activities in any set of Operating Guidelines. These sideboards in the Decision Framework were selected to provide sufficiently broad operational ranges and ensure the Department has the flexibility and environmental compliance necessary to operate consistent with the operational principles. **The sideboards do not imply the Department's adoption of specific volumes or predetermine future specific operations, which will be established through Operating Guidelines issued pursuant to the ROD.**

During each operating interval a process will be carried out consisting of reviews, consultation with stakeholders and, opportunities for consensus building. ***The Department will consult with the Basin States, Basin Tribes, Mexico, other Federal agencies and other interested stakeholders throughout the guideline development process and will give priority consideration to consensus recommendations.*** The Department will provide the opportunity to submit comments on draft Operating Guidelines. During the development process, the Department will conduct a review to determine whether additional environmental compliance is needed and will complete any such compliance prior to finalizing the Operating Guidelines and publishing them in the Federal Register.

Summary of the 2027-2028 Operating Guidelines

► Operation of Lake Powell

- Three elevation ranges (Upper Elevation, Mid-Elevation and Low Elevation Infrastructure Protection) with corresponding annual release volumes between 6 million acre feet (maf) and 8.23 maf; the initial annual volume will be chosen such that Lake Powell is projected to stay above 3,510 ft.
- After consultation, release may be adjusted down to a minimum of 5 maf, in combination with releases from CRSP Upper Initial Units to protect elevation 3,500 ft (subject to hydrologic conditions).
- Releases may be adjusted upward, provided Lake Powell stays above 3,510 ft, and may exceed 8.23 maf if Lake Powell is projected to end the year above 3,565 ft.

► Drought Operations of CRSP Upper Initial Units

- Additional releases made from the CRSP Upper Initial Units (subject to hydrologic conditions) if Lake Powell release is < 7 maf.
- Releases determined using a process agreed to by Department and Upper Basin States that expressly includes consultation requirements with the Lower Basin States.

► Operation of Lake Mead

Basin Shortage

- Consistent with the proposal from the Lower Basin States, 1.25 maf reductions in 2027 and in 2028 with consultation for additional actions if Lake Mead is projected to fall below 1,010 ft.

System Conservation

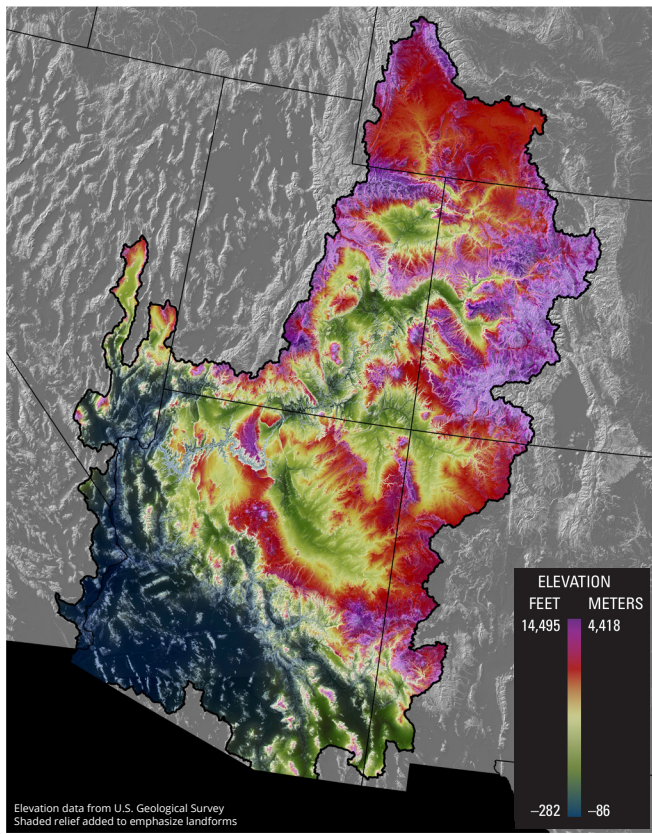
- Consistent with the proposal from the Lower Basin States, a minimum of 700 thousand acre feet (kaf) of system conservation in Lake Mead through 2028.

Intentionally Created Surplus (ICS)

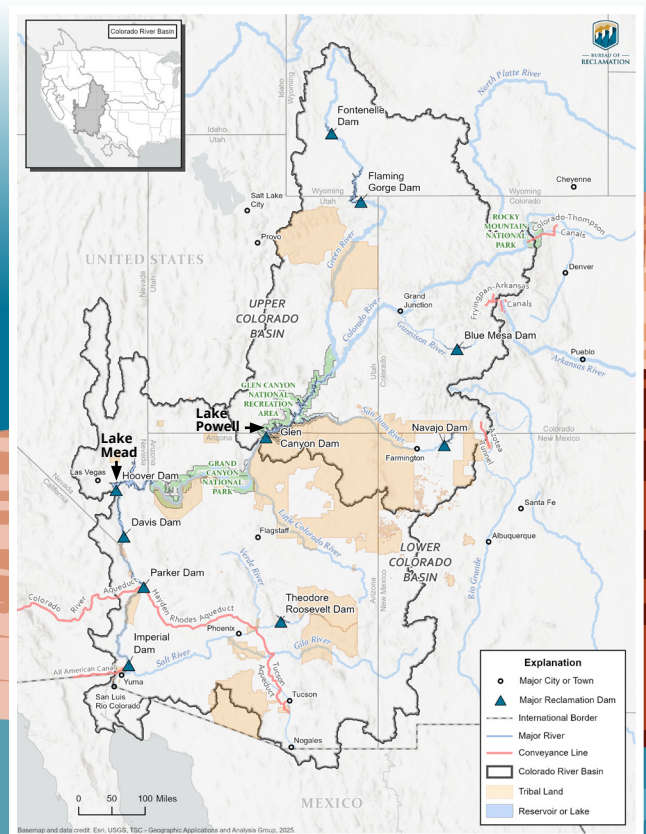
- Consistent with the proposal from the Lower Basin States, expanded ICS accumulation limits, extended delivery access, and system assessments. Limitation of cumulative ICS delivery to maximum of 800 kaf through 2028.
- Delivery of ICS below Lake Mead elevation 1,025 ft requires consultation with the Secretary and no ICS may be delivered below Lake Mead elevation 1,000 ft.

Federally Managed Water Resources Pool

- Consistent with a proposal from the Lower Basin States and incorporating input from Lower Basin Tribes, created to meet Federal firming or other Federal obligations pursuant to Congressionally authorized Indian water rights settlements and to provide limited Tribal shortage offsets up to 25% of reduced entitlements.
- Maximum water accumulation limit of 450 kaf.



Colorado River Basin elevation map



Colorado River Basin map