



THE SOUTHWESTERN WATER CONSERVATION DISTRICT

Developing and Conserving the Waters of the
SAN JUAN AND DOLORES RIVERS AND THEIR TRIBUTARIES
IN SOUTHWESTERN COLORADO
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Two West Slope Water Conservation Districts Jointly Adopt Principles for Addressing Colorado River Drought Conditions

MONTROSE, COLORADO—The two Water Conservation Districts that comprise the entire Colorado River basin in Colorado adopted implementation principles concerning how the current, extended drought conditions are addressed on the Colorado River’s storage system.

The Colorado River and Southwestern Water Conservation Districts met in a special joint meeting on September 18 in Montrose, CO to address the ongoing drought conditions in the Colorado River basin and its effects on storage and operations of Lakes Powell and Mead. The two boards unanimously adopted a recommended priority for a contingency plan in response to extraordinarily low reservoir levels. The boards resolved that changes in federal reservoir operations and additional investment in river augmentation programs must be the first priority.

If it becomes necessary to implement the contingency plan due to ongoing drought conditions, stored water in Flaming Gorge, Navajo and the Aspinall Unit (Blue Mesa Reservoir) should be released and subsequently stored in Lake Powell to increase Powell’s lake levels. Additional weather modification (winter cloud seeding) and removal of non-native, riparian trees (tamarisk and Russian olive) should be undertaken to enhance both river flows and water levels in Lake Powell.

Only if those efforts prove insufficient should “demand management” proposals be pursued, as these efforts will disrupt traditional water uses. Demand management proposals include a reduction in consumption by municipal and irrigation users and voluntary deficit irrigation and temporary fallowing by agricultural users.

The two boards stressed the importance that any demand management effort include conservation by both municipal and agricultural water users, and that any agricultural water disruptions be shared by Colorado River water users on both the east and west slopes.

Background

The entire Colorado River basin from the Rockies through the Lower Basin to Mexico is in at least the 15th year of an historic drought. Despite occasional above-average years, the 15-year trend is very dry. This is perhaps best and most easily evidenced by declining lake levels at Lake Powell and Lake Mead. As of this date, Powell is about half full and Mead is below 40% full. Continuation of this trend has potentially dire consequences to all water users of the Colorado River.

The seven Colorado River basin states and the Bureau of Reclamation are working on what is being referred to as a “contingency plan” to avoid the unacceptable consequences if the current basin-wide drought continues.

At Lake Powell the concern is that storage could drop below the elevation necessary to produce power (3,490' - or only 4 million acre feet of storage). If this occurs, federal agencies would lose up to \$120 million per year in power revenues. These revenues are used to cover the operation of power generating units and the transmission grid, repay the federal treasury for the facilities, and cover the costs of critical environmental recovery programs such as the San Juan and Upper Colorado River Basin Endangered Fishes Recovery Programs and the Salinity Control Program. Additionally, customers of the federal power could see their power costs skyrocket, as the Western Area Power Administration (WAPA) would have to go to the spot market to replace the lost hydropower.

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