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Arizona's Water Future: Colorado River Shortage, Innovative Solutions, and Living Well with Less

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Arizona and the Southwestern United States are facing perhaps their greatest challenge since the settlement of the region and development of modern cities, agriculture, and industry. **Arizona's "bank" for 40% of its water – Lake Mead on the Colorado River – is being drained faster than it can be filled.**

Projections show that if no action is taken to address the gap between supply and demand, Lake Mead could reach a critical stage within the next few years, triggering progressively larger mandatory restrictions on Colorado River water use that could have a devastating impact on Arizona's communities, agriculture, environment, and economy. Western Resource Advocates undertook a review of current laws and water use data that is not widely publicly known to clarify which entities would face water cutbacks at different levels of Lake Mead (see Figure ES.1).

Suburban Growth and Agriculture Likely First to Face Water Reductions

Measures to meet legal obligations with the federal government, Nevada, and California could result in water used for suburban land development and water banked for future use to be greatly curtailed. Additionally, there is the potential for a number of agricultural irrigation districts in central Arizona to see sharp reductions in the amount of water they receive from the Colorado River. **These cuts are projected to occur if Lake Mead falls to an elevation of 1,075 feet, which has a nearly 50% chance of happening as soon as 2018.**

Major Cities Could Face Water Reductions within this Decade

If water management actions do not change and water levels in Lake Mead continue to fall, progressively larger reductions will be required that eventually will impact Arizona's cities and towns. As the law is written today, cuts to central Arizona cities could happen before 2020, but proposed additional cutbacks currently being negotiated may impact cities even sooner.

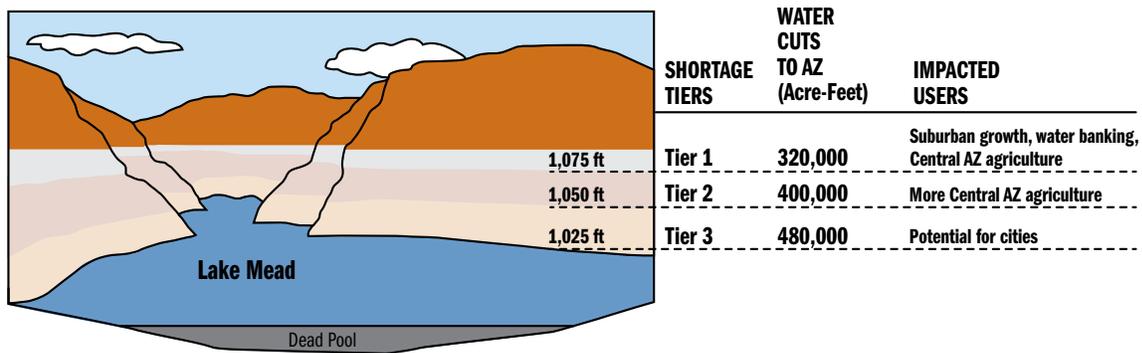


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Figure ES.1 Suburban Growth, Agriculture, and Cities Face Water Shortages as Lake Mead Shrinks



Source: U.S Bureau of Reclamation. Colorado River Interim Guidelines for Lower Basin Storage, 2007

Arizona Can Avoid Water Cuts with Proactive Actions to Stop the Decline of Lake Mead

Arizona’s economy, quality of life, agriculture, and environment are on the line. The time is now for Arizonans to take steps to respond to falling Lake Mead water levels, and enter a new phase of long-term collaboration, innovative water management, water conservation and efficiency, and water reuse. This requires a new look at how water cuts are implemented and how shortages can be avoided.

Arizona has already taken important action by implementing interim measures to keep more water in Lake Mead to help stave off federally mandated cutbacks of Colorado River water. The state has also been working with California, Nevada, and key water users within Arizona on plans to avoid critically low levels in Lake Mead. These actions are a good start, but temporary agreements are not long-term solutions.

Western Resource Advocates and our partners support the state’s efforts to collaborate on finding a long-term solution to Colorado River shortages. We have developed a number of policies and actions directed at Arizona’s impending Colorado River water shortage over the next decade. These immediate actions and longer term plans will help address Lake Mead’s falling water levels in ways that can protect groundwater and still allow Arizona’s agriculture, cities, Indian tribes, economy, and environment to thrive in a future with less water.

The solution set we propose abides by seven key tenets:

- 1 Adopt next-generation water conservation and efficiency
- 2 Expand system conservation programs to stabilize Lake Mead levels
- 3 Increase innovative water sharing arrangements
- 4 Create an Arizona Water Bank Recovery Plan Stakeholder Committee
- 5 Uphold the integrity of Indian water rights settlements
- 6 Protect the state’s groundwater resources
- 7 Protect Arizona’s wildlife and natural areas

Arizona needs its Governor, elected officials, water users, and other water stakeholders to work together and consider innovative solutions to achieve a new water paradigm for Arizona. The time to act is now. We can address Arizona’s water future, so that our communities maintain a high quality of life, our agricultural heritage will continue, and our wildlife, rivers and lakes thrive – but only if we act together to find fair and equitable solutions for all Arizonans. We are confident that Arizona and its residents are up to the challenge and ready to protect and sustain the Colorado River, the heart of the “Grand Canyon State.”