



Five Principles for Governing the Colorado River

The Colorado River provides water to roughly 35 million people, supports 16 million jobs, irrigates 5.5 million acres of land, supports world class recreation, and sustains critical wildlife habitat as it winds its way through some of the most treasured and sacred landscapes in the nation. But the century-old foundation governing the river is crumbling under the weight of climate change, drought, and growing water demands – leaving the people, ecosystems, and economies that depend on the Colorado River at risk.

Decisions made over the next few years will determine the future of the Colorado River and the West as we know it. The federal Bureau of Reclamation is developing a plan for managing the river after 2026, when current management guidelines expire. The survival of the Colorado River depends on our ability to implement equitable and forward-thinking strategies to conserve water and keep the river flowing.



At WRA, we believe the policy foundation governing the Colorado River must include five principles:



Principle 1. Reduce water use across the Basin by 25%.

The annual demand for water from the Colorado River exceeds the available supply by roughly 1.5 million acre-feet, which is enough water to meet the annual needs of upwards of 15 million people. Businesses, industry, cities, farms, and ranches throughout the Basin must come together to reduce water demand. We must also ensure that Basin Tribes, who have long been denied their fair share of water, have the ability to access water and are key players in identifying strategies for sustainable management.



Principle 2. Plan for there being less water in the river today and less water in the future due to a warming, drying climate.

Actions to address water shortages on the Colorado River are often too small and implemented too late. Realistic climate projections and water demand forecasts must be incorporated into the river's management guidelines. We need proactive policies and more frequent evaluation of operating guidelines to respond to changing conditions on the river before there is a crisis.



Principle 3. Keep water flowing in the river to protect irreplaceable ecosystems, cultural values, and outdoor recreation opportunities.

We must be more strategic in how we move water between the Colorado River's reservoirs to protect and restore the health of the river while also meeting the needs of downstream users. For example, during high flow experiments, water releases are timed to mimic periodic natural flooding in the Grand Canyon to rebuild beaches and maintain important riparian habitats. Going forward, policies for managing the river and its reservoirs must similarly aim to keep the river healthy and flowing.



Principle 4. Include Colorado River Basin Tribes, who have long been denied access to their fair share of water, in decision-making and ensure that they have equitable access to water.

There are 30 federally recognized Tribes in the Colorado River Basin yet Tribal water rights, infrastructure needs, and values have long been put on the back burner. Tribal communities throughout the Basin have been left without access to clean running water as a result. Tribes must have a seat at the decision-making table in Colorado River negotiations and must be able to access and use their water in the ways that they believe will benefit their communities.



Principle 5. Provide impacted people, conservation groups, and other stakeholders the opportunity to meaningfully contribute ideas for sustaining the river.

In the past, stakeholders have been informed of decision points, but were not always given the opportunity to meaningfully provide ideas for managing the river. Going forward, decision-making forums must be transparent, accessible, and meaningfully inclusive, and enable input from a broad range of impacted people, conservation groups, and other stakeholders. A transparent process might include holding stakeholder meetings each quarter, allowing for virtual participation, and creating a website to house meeting information. We need all-hands-on-deck to address the Colorado River crisis.

Short-term fixes over the last 20 years have failed to address the scale of the challenge confronting the Colorado River. We must use this historic opportunity to repair the river's crumbling policy foundation and put in place a forward-thinking plan to protect the Colorado River and the people, fish, and wildlife that rely on it.



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To learn more about these principles, visit:



A Blueprint for
Governing the
Colorado River