

Colorado River Policy Recommendation: Creating a Conservation Reserve

The Colorado River is the lifeblood of the West, but climate change and burgeoning water demands have pushed the river to a breaking point. We have an important opportunity to update the guidelines for governing the Colorado River after 2026. The future of the West hinges on our ability to work together to protect the river that sustains us all.



The Conservation Reserve would serve as a savings account to maximize the ecological and community benefits of every drop of water saved.

Why it's needed

Demand for water from the Colorado River vastly exceeds what the river can provide, yet existing conservation programs are limited in scope. There is no basin-wide program to save and store water to protect the river and the communities that rely on it.

Under the current Intentionally Created Surplus (ICS) program, certain water users in the Lower Basin can reduce their use of water from the Colorado River through measures like increasing irrigation efficiency, fallowing lands, or leveraging other water sources. That conserved water is then stored in Lake Mead where it can help stabilize the reservoir. Water users may withdraw their water at a later date depending on system conditions and other factors.

While the ICS program has provided some benefit to Lake Mead, participation is restricted in scope and the program's impact is limited to just the Lower Basin. There is no comparable conservation program in the Upper Basin. In addition, because ICS water can only be stored in Lake Mead, it cannot be used to benefit upstream ecosystems.

The basin needs a savings account to protect the river and all who rely on it.



How it works

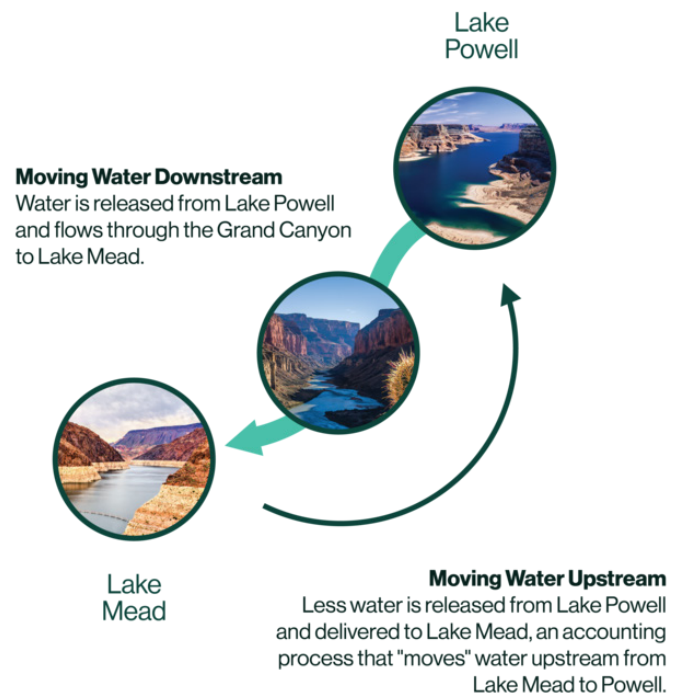
The Conservation Reserve (Reserve) would build on the ICS program and increase water conservation to benefit communities and the environment. Water users would have the opportunity to save water and add it to the Reserve. Once in the Reserve, this water would be stored in Lake Powell or Lake Mead.

Unlike ICS, the Reserve would serve as a separate savings account that would not affect reservoir operations – something that is sometimes referred to as “top storage.” Like a savings account, water users who contribute to the Reserve could withdraw their saved water at a later date.

The Reserve would be managed by the Bureau of Reclamation in collaboration with the basin states to protect river health and stabilize the system. For example, the Reserve's water might be stored in Lake Powell and released through the Grand Canyon to benefit fish and wildlife. Once this water enters Lake Mead, it could be "moved" back upstream through an accounting process and released once more to benefit river health. Future iterations of the Reserve could even allow water to be moved further upstream to benefit streamflow in the Upper Basin.

By allowing the water to be stored and moved within the basin, we can maximize the community and ecological benefits of every drop saved.

Moving Reserve Water Between Powell & Mead to Benefit the Grand Canyon



Demand for water from the Colorado River vastly exceeds the supply, yet there is no basin-wide program to **save and store** water to protect the river and the communities that depend on it.



The Conservation Reserve would allow water users to **voluntarily save water** and store it in the Reserve.



Like a savings account, water users could withdraw their stored water from the Reserve at a later date. The Reserve would function as a separate account that would not affect reservoir operations, such as Lake Powell releases or Lower Basin



The Reserve's water could be stored in Lake Powell or Lake Mead then used to **protect river health and stabilize the system**.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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