

Colorado River Policy Recommendation:

Shaping River Management for the Environment

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.



Reservoir operations and water conservation programs must maximize ecological and recreational benefits in key river reaches and habitats.

Why it's needed

A healthy Colorado River is the foundation of our region. The river provides water to 35 million people, irrigates 5.5 million acres of land, supports 16 million jobs, and fuels a \$26 billion recreation economy. Its water sustains irreplaceable wildlife habitat and supports numerous species of fish, including several that are found nowhere else on earth.

When the Colorado River's water was divided up a century ago, no attention was paid to the needs of the environment. Today, river flows and wildlife habitat have been drastically altered by climate change, unsustainable water demands, and a network of dams and pipelines.

The new post-2026 guidelines must include stewardship measures to protect the ecosystems that the entire region depends on.





How it works

Management actions must ensure that there is sufficient water in the river to support recreation and all aspects of a healthy river system, including riparian habitat, fish populations, water temperature, and water quality. This includes:



Managing reservoir releases to benefit river health and recreation

Water releases from reservoirs must be timed to maximize ecological and recreational benefits, including meeting recommended flows for endangered fish and wildlife, building critical beaches, and providing appropriate water temperatures for native fish. This is especially true when operations are changed to address drought or unanticipated circumstances. For example, a renewed or updated Drought Response Operations Agreement should expressly include timing releases to support the environment and recreation.



Including criteria to benefit river reaches in conservation programs

Programs developed to enable reductions in consumptive use must include criteria to prioritize projects that will benefit river reaches in need of water for the environment and recreation. This might include System Conservation Pilot Program projects, demand management, or other programs developed alongside the Interim Guidelines. In addition, basin states and the Bureau of Reclamation should have authority to shepherd conserved water downstream at times and in volumes that will benefit river health and recreation while still meeting the needs of downstream states and properly crediting upstream states.

The new Interim Guidelines must treat the river as a dynamic, living system and work to keep that system healthy.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Bart Miller
Healthy Rivers Director
bart.miller@westernresources.org

John Berggren, Ph.D.
Regional Policy Manager
john.berggren@westernresources.org

