Colorado River Resources

- **Colorado River Management Report**

Summary

This report provides a summary of activities related to management of Metropolitan's Colorado River resources for May 14, 2026–June 16, 2026.

Purpose

Informational

Detailed Report

Senate Hearing on Colorado River

Metropolitan was invited to join a panel as part of a Colorado River Hearing before the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources. The hearing was initiated to provide Congress with an update on the status of the Colorado River negotiations and consider potential additional funding opportunities. Bill Hasencamp represented Metropolitan at the hearing, emphasizing his agency's desire for a seven-state consensus agreement that would minimize the risks posed by litigation among the Basin States. He highlighted California's example of permanently reducing its demands for Colorado River water by developing agricultural-urban partnerships that provide broad participation for reductions across the state. California's success could be an example throughout the Basin States of all agencies working together to provide needed reductions to develop a more sustainable Colorado River. Assistant Secretary Andrea Travenick also testified during the hearing, providing an update on the status of the post-2026 Guidelines. The Senators were clearly disappointed that we have not yet achieved a seven-state agreement, and time has almost run out for this year.

Develop Post-2026 Guidelines and Negotiate Implementation Agreements: Provide Input that Shapes Reclamation's Selected Alternative

Both the Interior Department in its May 28 response and the Upper Division States in a June 1 letter responded to the Lower Division States' May 1 Proposal (May 1 Proposal) that outlined a framework for short-term operations of the Colorado River system for calendar years 2026 through 2028. The May 1 Proposal includes coordinated operational measures for Lake Powell, Lake Mead, and the Bureau of Reclamation's (Reclamation) three Colorado River Storage Project Upper Initial Units (UIUs) that are reservoirs upstream of Lake Powell. The May 1 Proposal includes Lower Basin reductions totaling 1.25 million acre-feet (MAF) annually in 2027 and 2028, allocated among Arizona (760 TAF), California (440 TAF), and Nevada (50 TAF). Under the May 1 Proposal, reductions may be satisfied through reduced water orders and/or the use of Intentionally Created Surplus (ICS), subject to certain limitations. The May 1 Proposal also contemplates consultation regarding additional protective actions if Lake Mead projections decline below an elevation of 1,010 feet. The May 1 Proposal would extend and modify the existing ICS framework through 2028, including new evaporation and system assessments on ICS balances, increased state storage limits, and additional flexibility for ICS withdrawals at lower Lake Mead elevations. The May 1 Proposal also establishes a new Lower Basin Offset Pool intended to provide flexibility to conserve water early to avoid future mandatory reductions beyond 1.25 MAF.

Interior Department’s May 28 Response

The Interior Department’s May 28 response was generally supportive of the proposed Lower Basin reductions of 1.25 MAF per year, expanded ICS account capacity by an additional 1.1 MAF and extending the withdrawal period for existing ICS through 2038. However, Interior proposes a different system for making Lake Powell releases than what was in the May 1 Proposal. Interior’s May 28 response would scale Lake Powell’s annual releases up or down based on reservoir elevations, releasing more water downstream when Powell is high and less when it is low. The entire Lake Powell release in the May 28 framework is built around protecting a minimum elevation of 3,510 feet, the level needed to keep Glen Canyon Dam operating safely. If Lake Powell is projected to drop below that line, Reclamation would reduce releases to a floor of 6.0 MAF and draw on the UIUs to maintain that level, while reserving the right to impose deeper cuts or larger Lower Basin shortages if conditions worsen. Metropolitan staff have joined the Lower Division States in discussions regarding the timing and triggers for infrastructure protection actions in an effort to ensure that the burden of protecting Glen Canyon Dam infrastructure does not fall disproportionately on the Lower Basin.

Regarding operations of Lake Mead, the Interior Department agreed to support the Lower Division States’ revised ICS proposal that would cap cumulative deliveries at no more than 800 TAF across 2026 through 2028, but tightens ICS access as Lake Mead drops. Once Lake Mead falls into the elevations of 1,025–1,000 feet, ICS deliveries would be limited to urgent, critical water supply needs, would require consultation with the other Lower Division States and the Secretary before any request, and could be reduced or denied by the Interior Secretary if the delivery would push Mead below 1,000 feet that year. Below 1,000 feet, ICS would be inaccessible. Given the potential importance of ICS to meeting California’s reductions, Metropolitan staff have been working with Reclamation to develop a clear and predictable process for ICS access below Lake Mead elevation 1,025 feet.

Upper Division States’ June 1 Letter

On June 1, 2026, the Upper Division States, writing through the Upper Colorado River Commission, sent their input on the May 1 Proposal to Reclamation. The letter answers Reclamation’s May 28 response to the May 1 Proposal for 2027–2028 operations, and in their letter the Upper Division States express their frustration with being sidelined. The Upper Division States point out that Reclamation, by its own account, met repeatedly with the Lower Division States to understand their proposal but never did the same for the Upper Basin, then gave the Upper Division States just two business days to react to a response that ignored their own operational framework and their earlier May 22 comments entirely. They warn that Reclamation’s response, with its adjustments to the Lower Division States’ proposal, may already be pre-decisional, and they pointedly refuse to endorse either that proposal or Reclamation’s response, reserving the right to object to either if it surfaces in a Preferred Alternative.

On substance, the letter makes six points, and the sharpest are about authority. Above all, the Upper Division States insist that operation of the UIUs is outside of the scope of the Post-2026 NEPA process and cannot be written into the Record of Decision and that those operations need to be governed by a negotiated successor to the Drought Response Operations Agreement between the Upper Division States and Reclamation, not by Reclamation acting on its own. They go further and argue that Reclamation’s apparent reliance on unspecified emergency authorities overreaches what it is actually authorized to do and exposes it to legal challenge. The rest of the letter presses familiar concerns: the response still leans too heavily on six-month forecasts that have a track record of running too high on Lake Powell and too low on Lake Mead; it preserves a rigid, 2007-style tier structure that has not protected Lake Powell in dry years; it risks unsustainable Powell releases; it should commit to monthly Lake Mead release accounting with consultation; and the Upper Division States simply do not yet have enough detail to evaluate it fully. They close by demanding that Reclamation actually analyze and respond in writing to the Upper Basin’s Lake Powell operating proposal, renewing their call for neutral mediation, and reserving the right to say more.

Next Steps

Discussions with the Interior Department and Reclamation are likely to continue over the next several weeks before the Final Environmental Impact Statement for Post-2026 Colorado River Reservoir Operations is published.