Subcommittee on Imported Water

Report on Development of Post-2026 Guidelines

Item 3e

August 25, 2026

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Item 3e
Report on Development of Post-2026 Guidelines

Subject

Department of Interior's Record of Decision (ROD) for the post-2026 operations of the Colorado River system reservoirs and issuance of the 2027-2028 Operating Guidelines

Purpose

Review the ROD 10-Year Framework and 2027-2028 Operating Guidelines

Next Steps

Focus on development of a Lower Basin implementation agreement and intra-California implementation agreement

OVERVIEW

What We'll Cover

Why New Guidelines Are Needed

Historic drought and expiring agreements.

The 2027–2036 Decision Framework

The adaptive structure for the next decade.

The 2027–2028 Operating Guidelines

The specific rules taking effect this October.

Environmental Commitments & What's Next

Protecting the river's ecosystem.

THE SITUATION

A River System Under Strain

26 Years

Unprecedented drought across the Basin, dating to 2000

12.5 MAF

Combined Powell + Mead storage — lowest since Powell began filling in 1963

Record Low

Snowpack in winter 2025–2026 — lowest since the 1930s

Since 2021, extraordinary actions — extra releases from upstream reservoirs and reduced Glen Canyon Dam releases — have been required just to protect the dam's infrastructure.

THE TRIGGER

Three Pillars of River Management Expire Sept. 30, 2026

2007 Interim Guidelines

Governed coordinated Powell/Mead operations and shortage-sharing since 2007.

2019 Drought Contingency Plan

Additional Lower Basin shortage commitments to slow Lake Mead's decline.

Related U.S.–Mexico Agreements

Cooperative measures implementing the 1944 Water Treaty.

New operations must begin October 1, 2026 — with or without Basin-wide consensus.

HOW WE GOT HERE

Three Years of Basin-Wide Engagement

JUN 2022
Pre-Scoping
Public input opens

JUN 2023
Notice of Intent
Formal NEPA review begins

JAN–MAR 2026
Draft EIS Comment
Public comment period

JUL 2026
Final EIS
Preferred Alternative named

AUG 21, 2026
ROD Signed
Secretary adopts framework

The Secretary convened all seven Basin Governors multiple times to seek consensus. Despite this, the States were unable to agree.

SECTION 10.3 OF THE ROD

Four Principles Guide Every Decision

Responsive to Hydrology

Annual operations adapt to real supply conditions, wet or dry.

Infrastructure Comes First

Protects critical facilities at Glen Canyon and Hoover Dam.

Implement the LROC

The 1968 criteria remain the backbone, with room for emergencies.

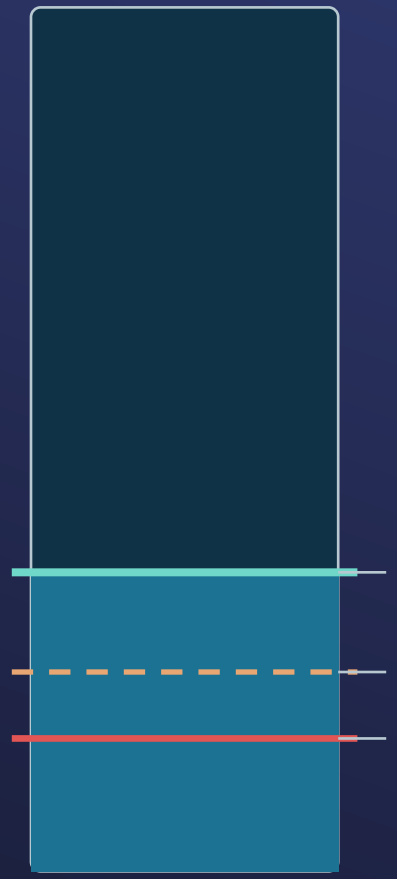
Consensus Wins

Basin-wide agreements are prioritized whenever they emerge.

WHY ELEVATION MATTERS

Critical Elevations — and Where We Stand Today

Lake Powell



≈ 3,515 ft — Aug 2026 Study Projection

Projected Lake Powell elevation, Oct 1, 2027

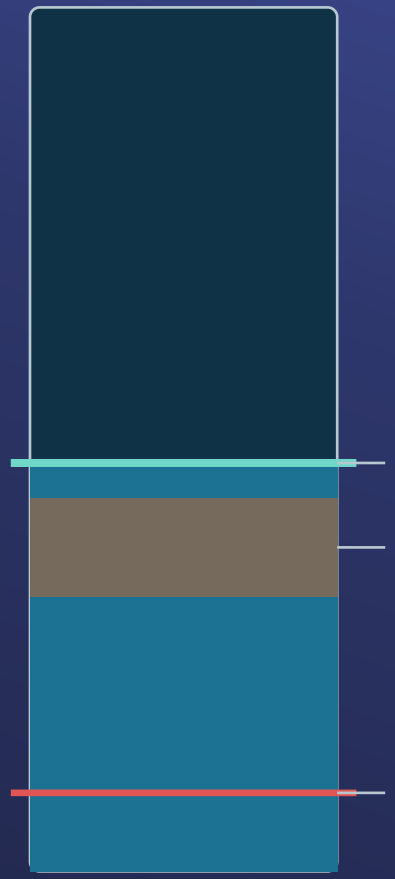
3,500 ft — Buffer

Triggers consultation on further action

3,490 ft — Critical

Below this, only river outlet works can release water

Lake Mead



≈ 1,034 ft — Aug 2026 Study Projection

Projected Lake Mead elevation, Jan 1, 2027

1,000–1,025 ft — New ICS Access Band

ICS delivery requires consultation; none delivered below 1,000 ft

950 ft — Critical

Below this, only intake towers; hydropower stops

SECTION 10.4 OF THE ROD

The Sideboards for Each Future Guideline

Lower Basin Shortages

Up to 3.0 MAF

Maximum, to protect Hoover Dam infrastructure

Lake Powell Releases

5.0–12.0 MAF

Annual range to protect Glen Canyon Dam

Conserved Water Storage

3.0 MAF Powell / 8.0 MAF Mead

Capacity for banked water and exchanges

Lower Basin Surplus

Up to 500 TAF

Extra, on top of flood-control releases

Upper Basin Contributions

Up to 200 TAF / year

Voluntary, subject to hydrologic conditions

SECTION 10.5 OF THE ROD

How Each New Set of Guidelines Gets Built

AUG (YR 1)

Issue Guidelines

For the upcoming 2 years

OCT (YR 2)

Review & Begin Next

Assess current guidelines

NOV–MAR (YR 2)

Draft Next Guidelines

Apply principles & sideboards

MAY 1 (YR 2)

Consensus Deadline

Basin recommendations due

JUN–JUL (YR 2)

Finalize & Comply

Complete environmental review

AUG 1 (YR 2)

Issue Final Guidelines

Published in Federal Register

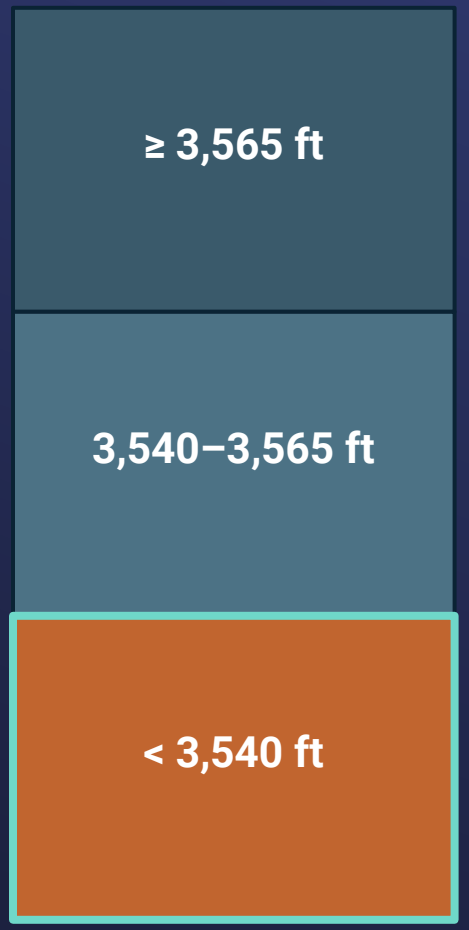
This roughly 12-month cycle repeats through 2036.

PART TWO

The 2027–2028 Operating Guidelines

What actually happens starting October 1, 2026

Lake Powell: Releases Set by Elevation



Upper Elevation Range — ≥ 3,565 ft

Starts at 8.23 MAF, steps down to hold 3,510 ft.

Mid-Elevation Range — 3,540–3,565 ft

Starts at 8.0 MAF, steps down as needed.

Low Elevation Protection Range — below 3,540 ft

7.0 MAF initial release, adjustable toward 6.0 MAF by monthly review — where 2027–2028 operations sit today.

2027–28 OPS ARE HERE

A 6.0 MAF minimum release floor applies throughout; CRSP Upper Initial Unit releases can supplement.

SECTION 5.3 — 2027–2028 GUIDELINES

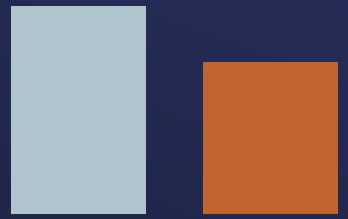
Lake Mead: A Shortage Condition for 2027–2028

6.25 MAF

Apportioned for Lower Basin use — a 1.25 MAF cut from the 7.5 MAF Normal Condition

Contingent on successful adoption of the Lower Basin Implementation Agreement

Arizona



Normal 2.80 MAF

2027–28 2.04 MAF

–760,000 af (–27%)

California

Normal 4.40 MAF

2027–28 3.96 MAF

–440,000 af (–10%)

Nevada

Normal 0.30 MAF

2027–28 0.25 MAF

–50,000 af (–17%)

SECTION 5.3.B

Additional Voluntary Conservation, On Top of the Cuts

700,000

acre-feet — minimum

target: up to 1,000,000 af

Of total System Conservation water Lower Division State contractors intend to conserve across 2026–2028 — on top of the 1.25 MAF shortage reductions — through voluntary, compensated agreements. Reclamation will account for this volume separately in its Decree Accounting Report and apply 3% annual evaporation losses.

Estimated Minimum Contribution by State

CALIFORNIA
300 TAF

ARIZONA
300 TAF

NEVADA
100 TAF

In the absence of a Lower Division States implementing agreement, the Secretary will work directly with contractors to conserve additional System Conservation water where possible. Contributions are contingent on adequate funding and cost-shared between the states and Reclamation.

SECTION 5.4 — WATER BANKING

ICS: Two Things the Board Should Know

ICS lets a state or contractor bank water it conserves in Lake Mead, for delivery back in a future year. Two things matter most under the new guidelines:

Existing ICS Is Protected

Water already banked by contractors continues to be honored — deliverable through December 31, 2038.

The Option to Create New ICS Continues

Contractors may keep banking new water through December 31, 2028, under an approved plan.

SECTION 5.4.A–B

ICS by the Numbers

State	Annual Creation Cap	Max Accumulation	Annual Delivery Cap
Arizona	125,000 af	1.0 MAF	300,000 af
California	400,000 af	2.0 MAF	400,000 af
Nevada	125,000 af	800,000 af	300,000 af

- A one-time 10% deduction applies when Extraordinary Conservation ICS is created.
- Combined ICS deliveries, Jan 2026–Dec 2028, are capped at 800,000 acre-feet total.
- Stored ICS balances shrink 3% each year for evaporation losses.
- No ICS may be delivered when the January 1 Lake Mead elevation is below 1,000 ft.

SECTION 5.5

The Federal Pool: A New Tool for Tribal & Federal Priorities

Federally Managed Water Resources Pool (FMWRP)

A pool of federally controlled ICS in Lake Mead, capped at 450,000 acre-feet under the 2027–2028 guidelines, used strictly in this order:

1

Federal Firming Obligations

Meet Federal delivery obligations under congressionally authorized Indian Water Rights Settlements

2

Tribal Shortage Offsets

After Federal obligations are met, offset up to 25% of Tribal wet-water shortages to Mainstream Lower Colorado River or CAP entitlements

SECTION 5.6

Water Deliveries to Mexico Continue Under 1944 Treaty

Deliveries to Mexico are governed by the 1944 U.S.–Mexico Water Treaty and its implementing "Minutes" — separate from, and in addition to, the Lower Basin's own shortage apportionment.

Any reduction in deliveries to Mexico is determined by the International Boundary and Water Commission (U.S. and Mexico) through Minutes to the Treaty — a cooperative process used since 2008 through Minutes 316, 317, 318, 319, 323, and 330.

The Secretary implements any such reductions in coordination with the Department of State and the U.S. Section of the IBWC.

ENVIRONMENTAL COMPLIANCE

Protecting the River's Ecosystem

Endangered Species Act

New Biological Opinion (Aug 2026) covers key species with added conservation measures.

Multi-Species Conservation Program

50-year program restoring nearly 7,000 acres of habitat and stocking 1.2M+ native fish.

Glen Canyon Adaptive Management

Ongoing monitoring links dam operations to downstream resource protection.

Historic Preservation

A Programmatic Agreement with Tribes and states protects historic properties.

SUMMARY

Key Takeaways

1. A 10-year adaptive framework (2027–2036) replaces the expired 2007 guidelines.
2. Specific Operating Guidelines are reissued roughly every two years within it.
3. 2027–2028: lower Powell releases, a 1.25 MAF Lower Basin shortage, expanded ICS tools.
4. Consensus remains the priority — operations continue reliably either way.

Turning Operating Guidelines into Forecasts

2027-2028 Lake Powell Operating Tiers

October 1, 2026 Forecast

3,515.9

Lake Powell & Lake Mead Operational Diagram from the 2027-2028 Operating Guidelines[1]

Lake Powell

Elevation (feet)	Operation According to the 2027-2028 Operating Guidelines	Live Storage (maf)
3,700	Consult on releases consistent with Section 602(a) storage requirement contained in the Colorado River Basin Project Act.	23.31
3,665		18.20
	Upper Elevation Range Release between 7.50 maf and 8.23 maf.	
3,565		8.15
	Mid-Elevation Range Release between 7.00 maf to 8.00 maf.	
3,540		6.45
	Low Elevation Infrastructure Protection Range Release between 6.00 maf and 7.00 maf to maintain elevation 3,510 ft.	
3,510		4.70
3,500		4.22
3,490	**Extraordinary Circumstances** Consult regarding potential actions to further protect critical Glen Canyon Dam infrastructure.	3.74
3,370		0

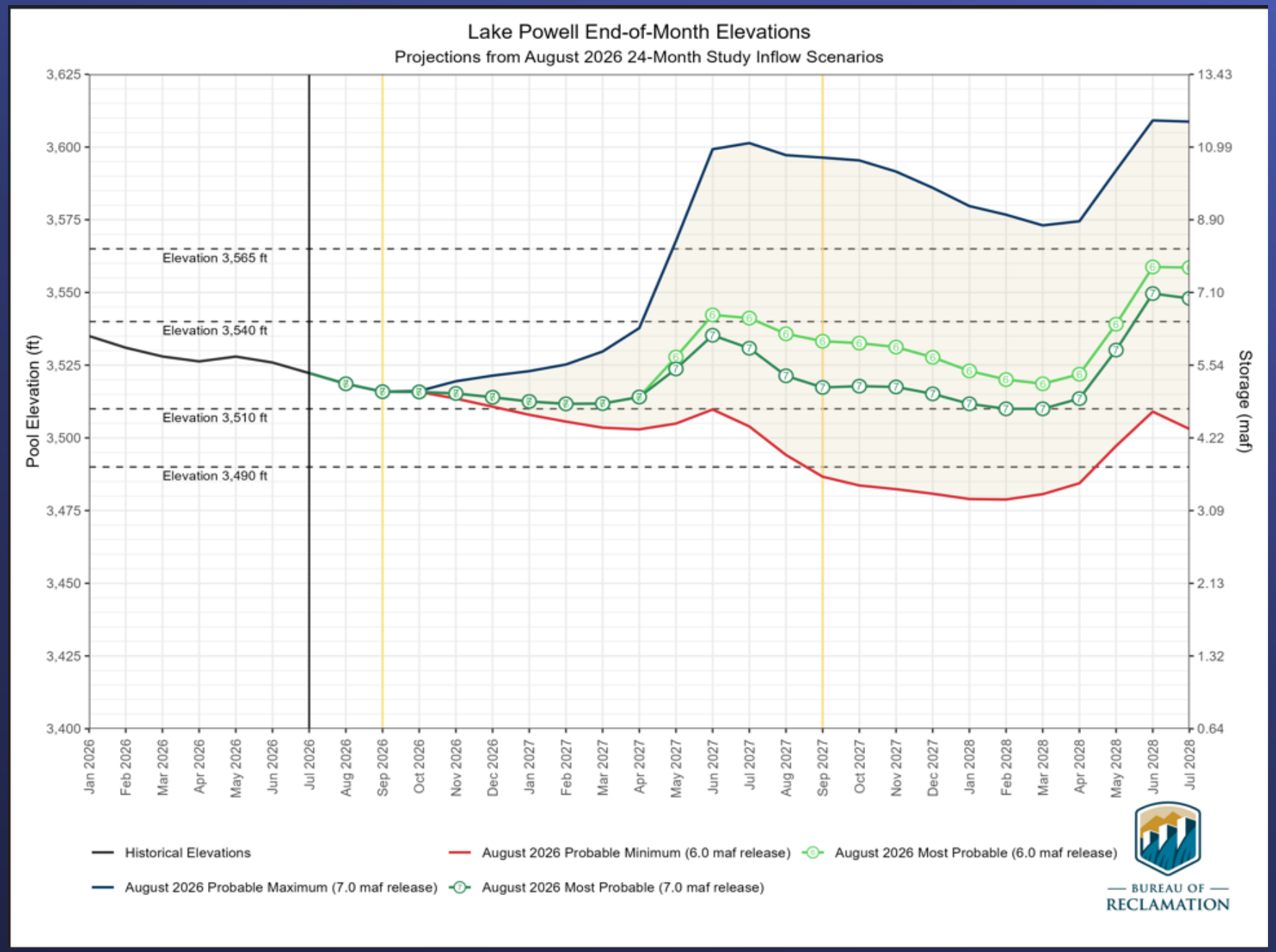
Lake Mead

Elevation (feet)	Operation According to the 2027-2028 Operating Guidelines	Live Storage (maf)
1,220		26.18
	Consult regarding the potential to increase apportionment above 6.25 maf.	
1,125		14.14
	Shortage Condition Determination and Lower Basin Reductions Apportion 6.25 maf to the Lower Division States.	
1,010		5.05
	Consult to consider potential actions throughout the Basin to respond to and address hydrologic and operational conditions.	
950		2.01
895		0

[1] Lake Powell and Lake Mead operational determinations will be documented in the draft 2027 AOP.

Lake Powell Forecast Under 27-28 Operating Guidelines

Most Probable Runs assumes Powell Inflow at 75% of average



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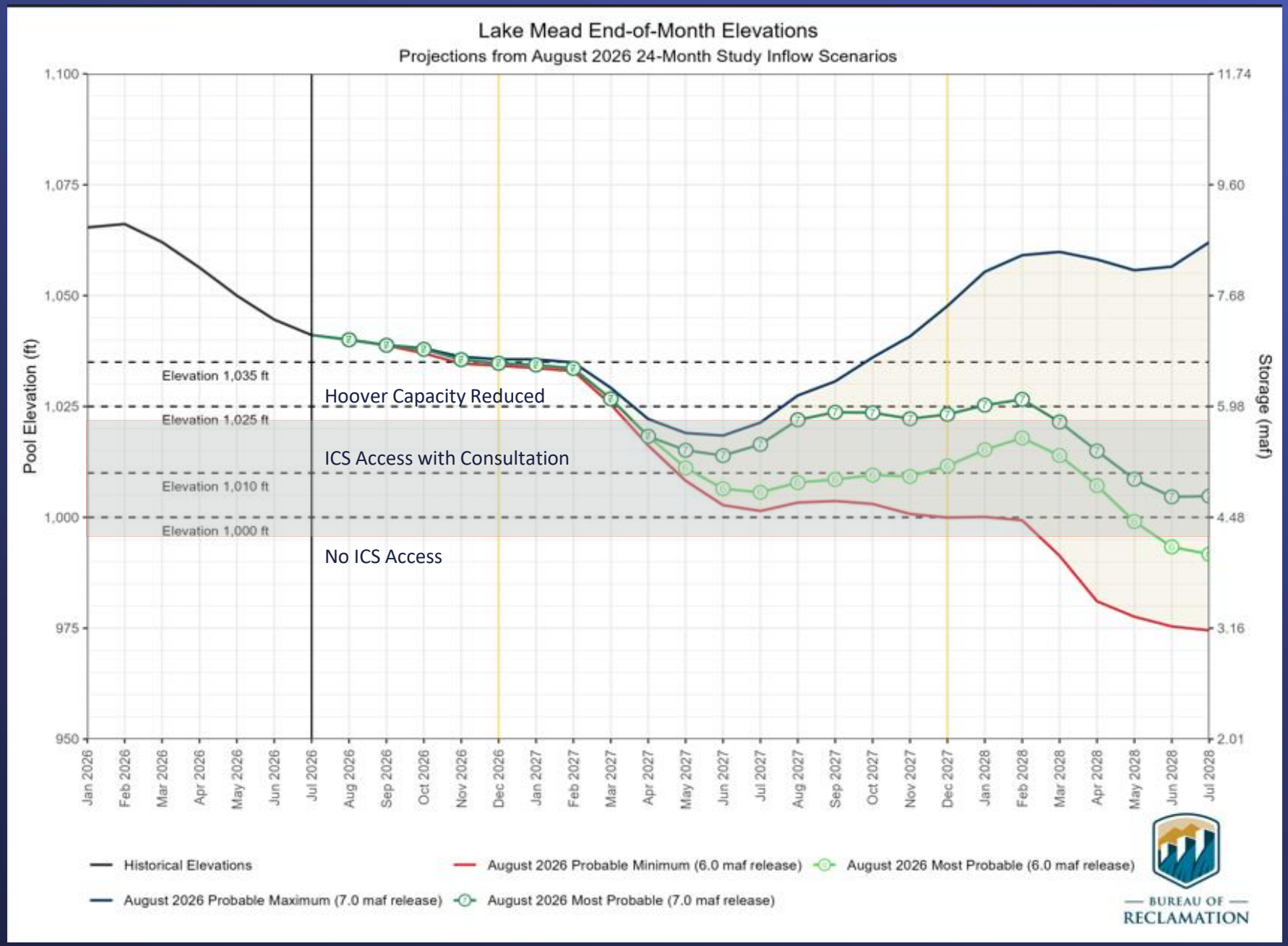

THE METROPOLITAN WATER DISTRICT OF
SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA
1928