

Opening Statement

861 words, ~5 min

I want to thank everyone for joining us today for an important hearing examining the Colorado River Drought Contingency Plan.

The Colorado River Basin has been in drought for 19 years and counting. The Basin spans the states of Arizona, California, Colorado, New Mexico, Nevada, Utah, and Wyoming. Representatives from all seven states are here with us today to tell this Committee about the severity of that drought, and the action it has spurred them to take.

Lake Mead, one of the Colorado River's two main reservoirs, has spent the last few years hovering around the level that would trigger a "shortage declaration," which would automatically lead to water delivery cuts.

With 40 million residents and five and half million acres of irrigated agriculture, the Colorado River supports communities from Kremmling, Colorado down to Coachella, California – along with major cities including Los Angeles, Phoenix, Las Vegas, and Denver. It is also a valuable resource to 29 tribes and the river support a \$25 billion outdoor recreation economy.

That’s a lot riding on a river that, since the turn of the century, has seen a 19% decline in flows on average. And climate change is likely to only make things worse. Just a month ago, this Committee heard expert testimony that hotter temperatures and lower precipitation will likely contribute to what scientists have termed “megadroughts” in the Southwestern United States throughout the rest of this century.

Right now, on the Colorado River, the reservoirs tell the story of historic drought in action. Lake Mead, the river's largest reservoir, is currently at 41% of its capacity. In fact, it has consistently been at half-capacity—or less—for the past six years.

And while there is positive news this year with improved snowpack levels, a single wet year isn't going to fix the problem on the Colorado River. Even though this year's snowpack is far above average, the flows into Lake Powell – the river's second largest reservoir – will likely be *below* average, reflecting the fact that there is a lot of catching up to do after the historically dry conditions we've seen over the past two decades.

The seven Colorado River Basin states know full well the challenge they face on the Colorado River, and they are here today to tell us how they hope to address it. Last Tuesday, the states sent us their Drought Contingency Plan, or DCP, which is a set of agreements that would help keep the river's two major reservoirs from dropping to dangerously low levels.

The states have asked Congress to approve enabling legislation to allow the DCP to move forward. The Department of the Interior has worked closely with the states over the several years it has taken to get the plan to this hearing room today, and there are certain provisions that will require Congress' approval for Interior to implement.

I'm pleased to see that those involved in the DCP have managed to work across state lines and across party lines to find ways to protect the Colorado River. I understand that the states started initial conversations in 2013 about what they could do to take the next step to conserve water and protect the river. Former Secretary of Interior Sally Jewell highlighted the importance of additional planning for this ongoing drought in a December 2013 speech discussing the need for a *contingency plan* that included states and tribes across the Colorado River Basin.

And today, we have the Bureau of Reclamation prepared to testify before the Committee to tell us how they have continued to work with the states to help reach this point.

I should note that Reclamation is also making water conservation commitments in the DCP, as is the nation of Mexico. I look forward to hearing more about how the plan that started with the states has grown to an intergovernmental and international partnership.

I also want to make sure we don't forget the impact of the Colorado River Basin drought on ecosystems and the environment. It's heartening to see that many in the environmental community have expressed support for the DCP.

I also want to applaud the efforts of the seven Basin states to work with our staff in recent days to ensure that our Members know we're respecting our nation's major environmental laws in DCP enabling legislation. My understanding is that there is broad support from all seven Basin states for DCP enabling legislation that will soon be introduced by Chairman Grijalva. I appreciate the work of the many people who helped get us to this point.

Finally, I should note that the ongoing drought has provided a common reason for the states to develop the DCP, but each state will face its own distinct set of challenges in implementation. In order to understand these challenges, and to recognize the robust partnership that is the foundation of the DCP, this Committee has asked representatives from all seven of the Basin states to testify today. I look forward to hearing not just what the DCP is, but why it matters to everyone who depends on this river.

With that, I want to invite the Ranking Member to say a few remarks.