

**COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES**  
**SUBCOMMITTEE ON WATER, OCEANS, AND WILDLIFE**  
**REMOTE OVERSIGHT HEARING**

October 15, 2021

2:00 p.m. ET

Oversight Hearing on “*Colorado River Drought Conditions and Response Measures – Day One.*”

Questions for the Record

**Question from Rep. Mike Levin, CA**

1. Mr. Nelson, I’ve heard from constituent water agencies who are concerned by the salinity issues caused by the shutdown of the Paradox Valley Unit. Have you heard similar concerns among your members? How do you see this issue impacting the water quality in the system?

**Response from Peter Nelson, Colorado River Commissioner, State of California:**

The Colorado River Board of California (Board) and its member agencies are very familiar with concerns expressed by California users of Colorado River water supplies regarding the continued seismic-safety shutdown of the Paradox Valley Unit (PVU), and I share these concerns. The PVU is the largest project of the Colorado River Basin Salinity Control Program. The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation (Reclamation) estimates that when fully operational, the PVU prevents nearly 100,000 tons of salt from entering the Colorado River annually. According to Reclamation, a fully operational PVU represents 7% of the salinity control in the Colorado River when measured at the Imperial Dam diversion structure located about twenty-six river miles upstream from Morelos Dam, which serves as the primary Mexican diversion point at Northerly International Boundary.

The shutdown of the PVU has direct water quality, water supply, and economic impacts to water users in the Lower Basin. Reclamation estimates that the loss of PVU salinity control could result in a nearly 10 mg/L increase in salinity at Imperial Dam with an associated economic impact of approximately \$25 million annually. Today, the Colorado River is experiencing critically dry conditions that short-term forecasts suggest will increase salinity in Lake Mead due to lower inflows of fresh water. Increasing salinity in the water supply for California impacts the effectiveness of water recycling plants and requires farmers to apply additional water to fields to leach salts from soils. It could take over a decade to regain the level of salt control (i.e., 100,000 tons of annual control) afforded by the PVU due to the time needed to ramp up replacement control projects if PVU is to remain inoperative over the long-term. All of these factors are magnified given the current critically dry conditions and further highlight the need to implement additional drought response activities in the Colorado River Basin, such as those currently being proposed by California, Arizona, and Nevada.

The State of California, through the Board and its member agencies, continues to collaborate closely with the other six Basin States and Reclamation through the Colorado River Basin Salinity Control Forum to identify options to restart or replace annual salinity control lost with the current shutdown of the PVU. Additionally, pursuant to Section 303(c)(1) of the 1972 Clean Water Act (P.L. 92-500) and the 1974 Colorado River Basin Salinity Control Act (P.L. 93-320), the seven Basin States and Reclamation are responsible for continuing effective salinity control measures in the Colorado River Basin to meet water quality standards and ensure that water supplies of sufficient quality continue to be available for use in the United States and Mexico. The Board and its member agencies appreciate your attention to the challenge of continuing to improve the water quality of the Colorado in the face of the potential loss of the Paradox Valley Salinity Control Unit.