

Opening Statement
The Honorable Cliff Bentz
Ranking Member
House Waters, Oceans and Wildlife Subcommittee
Oversight Hearing on the Colorado River, Part I
October 13, 2021

Thank you, Mr. Chair. This is a welcome committee hearing on an issue of incredible importance to not just to the seven states involved with the Colorado but all of the Western United States. This is the first of a two-part hearing on the two-decades long drought. I'm glad we're spending time on this important issue. This drought isn't affecting just the Colorado. It's affecting Oregon, Colorado, and Washington, and all of the other Western States. In fact, in the almost five months that have passed since this Subcommittee held a hearing on drought, over 5.8 million acres have burned and project water users in the Klamath and Central Valley have been given zero water allocations.

Project water users in Oregon and California have been given zero allocations of water. This has devastated communities throughout our watersheds and folks are understandably worried that another year of drought will be the nail in the coffin for farming and ranching families. Thousands of people are desperately worried that another year like this will be the final nail in the coffin. Meanwhile, at a time of massive supply chain problems throughout our entire economy, the last thing we need is to rely on foreign countries for our food. Our discussion today is really about choices between a lot of different uses of water.

The Colorado River Basin is a microcosm of what communities throughout much of the West are experiencing. It irrigates nearly 5.5 million acres of farmland, supplies water to 40 million people and produces vast amounts of hydropower. It is one of the most developed, regulated and negotiated rivers in the world and the citizens of urban places like Los Angeles, Las Vegas, Phoenix, Salt Lake City and Denver should thank the foresight of our water engineers for that development. Its storage projects have the ability to store four times over the River's annual average flow. But, that storage capacity is vastly under-utilized right now because of the drought.

In the beginning, some of the Colorado River Basin states and their communities fought against each other for water. But, the states eventually decommissioned their navies – and I say that jokingly – and found that it's better to negotiate consensus-based solutions. The most recent negotiation ended up with what's called the Drought Contingency Plans – or DCPs – to include management of the river during shortage conditions. Although I wasn't here, Congress and the Trump Administration quickly acted by introducing legislation to authorize the DCPs and, within two weeks, that legislation was law. That's hard to believe given today's climate.

Republican and Democrat Governors, their delegations and the Trump Administration agreed wholeheartedly on these plans. Those agreements contemplated shortages but those shortages are

no longer theoretical – they are as real as it gets. Arizona and Nevada, for the first time ever, will be experiencing a reduction in their water supplies. Another year like this will be devastating.

There are no simple, fast solutions here. The DCPs took years to negotiate and they expire in 2026. Today, we have the federal government, which is the rivermaster of the lower Colorado, the seven states and tribal representatives here to talk about living within the reality that they're in and potential solutions before and beyond 2026. I don't expect a breakthrough today, but I expect the continuation of a process aimed at bringing about resolution between the upper and lower basin and the states and water users within. I look forward to today's hearing and welcome the witnesses.