

Opening Statement

[730 words, ~4.5 minutes]

Thank you for joining us today for the second of two meetings on “Colorado River drought conditions and response measures.”

As we heard during our first meeting on this important subject last week, the Colorado River – which serves 40 million people and fuels \$1.4 *trillion* in economic activity each year – is currently experiencing a 21-year drought that is greatly exacerbated by climate change.

Last week, we heard testimony from the Interior Department about the unprecedented drought conditions we’re now seeing. In August, the Department made the first-ever “shortage” declaration in the Lower Colorado River Basin, and unprecedented actions were taken in the Upper Basin as well to slow declining water levels at key reservoirs that haven’t been seen in decades.

Last week, we also heard testimony from the representatives of seven states who described how they're working to share water supplies from a river that's greatly overallocated. We'll hear more about that today.

There are legal entitlements to the use of 17.5 million acre-feet of water each year from the Colorado River. In the 21st Century, the river's natural flow has averaged just 12.4 million acre-feet. Meanwhile, climate scientists are urging us to prepare for even less due to climate shifts that are bringing about even drier conditions across the Southwest.

Adjusting to these new, drier conditions will be one of the biggest climate challenges we face. Fortunately, parties across the Colorado River Basin have a long history of collaboration and creative problem solving. Those skills will be needed in the period ahead.

We'll hear about some of that creative problem solving today in testimony from the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California—the largest treated drinking water provider in the United States, which serves 19 million people. Metropolitan is collaborating with water managers in Nevada and Arizona to advance a large-scale water recycling project that, once built, can deliver enough drought-proof water supplies for half a million households. As we heard in testimony last week from California, Nevada, and Arizona, innovative projects like this will be needed to respond to changing climate conditions.

Last week, we also heard from two witnesses representing tribal nations. We'll continue the discussion today on the need to account for tribal water needs across the Colorado River Basin.

There are thirty tribal nations in the Colorado River Basin. Under the Winters doctrine—which was first recognized by the Supreme Court in 1908—these Tribes have significant legal rights to enough water from the Colorado River to secure and maintain viable homelands. And yet tribal communities still face significant water access barriers with devastating consequences.

For example, according to the Centers for Disease Control, American Indians and Alaska Natives are more likely than any other ethnic or racial group to be hospitalized or die from COVID-19. The data show that one of the main factors contributing to this elevated hospitalization and death rate is limited access to running water. These and other consequences of limited running water access must be addressed.

We'll also hear more today about environmental water needs in the Basin as declining water flows and high temperatures severely impact fish and wildlife.

Low water levels are also accelerating the spread of invasive non-native species, reducing critical habitat, and contributing to an ecological and human health crisis at the Salton Sea. As the Salton Sea shrinks due to reduced inflows and other factors, important Pacific Flyway habitat is lost and exposed lakebed is causing harmful air quality challenges for many communities. Addressing these environmental challenges must be a major focus as well moving forward.

While we face major challenges in the Colorado River Basin, I must note that we also have some effective tools in place to help respond to our current drought conditions. This includes the measures included in the Colorado River Drought Contingency Plan, which was authorized through legislation led by Chair Grijalva last Congress.

Many other initiatives are being led by members of this Committee to help address challenges that we'll hear more about today, including measures for near-term drought response, investments in water rights settlements, water data and technology development, resources for Salton Sea improvement projects, and investments in drought-proof water recycling projects.

I look forward to hearing from our panel of expert witnesses today on these and other response measures.

With that, I'd like to now recognize Ranking Member Bentz for any remarks he may wish to give.