

In the News: New Colorado River Water Savings Plan Doesn't Go Far Enough, Researcher Warns

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Colorado River

A new story in [Arizona Daily Star](#) amplifies research results from the [Center for Colorado River Studies](#), pointing out that emergency plans for water saving in the Colorado River likely won't be enough to stabilize the water-supply system that is currently beset by drought. The story, released December in the major Tucson newspaper, shared concerns from Kevin Wheeler, a member of the Future of the Colorado River research team, that the plan three Lower Basin states developed to save an extra 500,000 acre-feet of river water won't go far enough to stabilize dropping levels.

The 500+ Plan requires significant cuts in deliveries to the Central Arizona Project, which brings river water via canals to tribes, farms and the Phoenix and Tucson areas, as well as cuts to Nevada and Mexico. Wheeler warns that the Lower Basin states will ultimately need to save at least twice the amount of water proposed by the new plan, and at a faster pace, to prop up an ailing Lake Mead.

Meanwhile, all of the Colorado River Basin states are discussing longer-term plans for reduced consumption to prevent Lakes Mead and Powell from dropping below critical levels within the next few years. A 2019 Drought Contingency Plan (DCP) and the current 500+ plan are seen as short-term fixes for Lake Mead until a longer-term plan can be approved when all seven states negotiate

a replacement for the Interim Shortage Guidelines that expire in 2026. The most recent forecast for the Bureau of Reclamation predicted Lake Mead could fall to 1,030 feet by July 2023 and there is significant risk that Lake Powell will fall below the elevation at which hydroelectricity can be generated.

The Daily Star article, written by veteran Colorado River reporter Tony Davis, describes [the recent report](#) by the Center for Colorado River Studies as 'groundbreaking.' The report shows that a total of at least 2 million acre-feet of Lower Basin conservation will be needed to stabilize the combined reservoir storage of Lakes Mead and Powell. Wheeler said the Lower Basin needs to conserve faster than presently planned because of rapidly plummeting reservoirs. Lakes Mead and Powell have fallen faster this year than predicted. If the Millenium Drought that began in 2000 persists, the 1 million acre-feet of conservation now approved or on the verge of approval won't be enough, Wheeler said. And if river flows keep declining as they've done since the turn of the century, more savings will likely be needed, he said.

"Kevin Wheeler has led our research team in identifying strategies to sustainably utilize the Colorado River, and Kevin has demonstrated that significant changes must be implemented to match consumptive use with available supply," said Jack Schmidt, Director of the Center. "Our research group has focused on conducting objective analyses that inform the challenging policy decisions that must now be made. The rules and assumptions under which managers have operated for a century are probably not adequate to sustainably manage the river of the future. Runoff is decreasing as the global climate warms. Candid, research-based evaluations of reality and new management strategies are desperately needed."

Wheeler is an Oxford University senior research fellow and is one of the lead investigators for the [extensive series of Colorado River futures studies](#) conducted at the Center for Colorado River Studies.