



## POLICY BRIEF

### **Building a Sustainable Future for Agriculture in the Colorado River Basin through the 2026 Operating Guidelines for Coordinated Operations for Lake Powell and Lake Mead**

The seven Colorado River Basin States and stakeholders are engaging to replace the 2007 Interim Guidelines for Lower Basin Shortages and the Coordinated Operations for Lake Powell and Lake Mead. These Interim Guidelines are set to expire in 2026. Now, agricultural water users from the headwaters to the Mexican border have come together to present key principles and expectations that are critical to sustainable and durable operation of the Colorado River (River) into the future. The challenges and associated solutions facing the River are complex and nuanced. However, the unified message of Colorado River Basin (Basin) agriculture is simple: **agricultural production in the Basin is an irreplaceable national resource that is vital to U.S. food security, the ecosystem, and overall drought resilience. It must be protected by ensuring water remains on-farm.**

This statement is especially important now. The severe drought has led to a troubling narrative in some media coverage that seems to imply the current conditions warrant taking water from farmers to make more available for cities and the environment. This narrative ignores the value of ag water use and the interdependence between irrigation, wildlife habitat, and emergency drinking water supplies. Agricultural water users certainly recognize the increasing pressures on the River and are committed to being constructive partners in the Basin. For such a collaborative approach to succeed, it is important the current realities and multiple values of agricultural water use outlined below are recognized:

- In much of the Basin, agricultural water use has declined. At the same time, production has increased due to significant investments in technology, infrastructure, and improved management including new cropping patterns. Early action needs to be recognized.
- Despite improved water use efficiency, some continue to perpetuate the discredited myth that 80% of water use in the Basin is for agriculture. This argument fails to acknowledge that much of the amount diverted for agriculture returns to the River. These calculations also ignore environmental instream flows and the critical groundwater storage benefits that result from agricultural water use. This argument is disingenuous and appears designed to diminish agriculture.
- Additional efficiency can be realized, but there are limits to conservation before ag production becomes unviable. Targeting specific crops or irrigation practices for elimination disregards many practical and economic considerations of a sustainable farming or ranching operation, which producers are in the best position to assess.
- Removing water from farms and ranches will have unintended ecosystem and societal impacts, because:

- Irrigation provides significant environmental benefits that are often overlooked, including providing key habitat for migratory birds, sustaining floodplain function, and recharging aquifers. As an example, Colorado State University researchers found that 92 percent of that Northern Colorado’s artificial wetlands were connected to irrigation infrastructure.
- Agricultural lands, enabled by River water, provide open space, riparian habitat and wildlife corridors, and serve as important buffers between public wildlands and expanding urban and suburban areas.
- Irrigated agriculture provides a strong foundation for many rural communities in the Western U.S. and is vital to the economic, social and environmental health of those communities.
- Treating irrigated agriculture as a reservoir of water for municipal growth is not sustainable in the long run. Doing so will gradually remove flexibility in the system by reallocating ag water that can be temporarily utilized for emergency drinking water supplies during extreme drought and “hardening” it for permanent municipal use.
- Regardless of declines in per household water use, urban and suburban growth increases pressure on existing water supplies. Continued growth must be conditioned on cities developing new supplies to accommodate that growth.
- Maintaining food independence for this the Nation is more than just providing a healthy, abundant, and transparent food supply – it is also a matter of national security

Key components of a long-term solution for the River that should be incorporated in post-2026 guidelines are outlined below.

- To ensure balanced solutions are achieved, agricultural producers throughout the Basin must have a place at the table. The full value of irrigation must be accurately and fairly considered.
- An important initial action should include identifying and addressing all data gaps and best available science – whether hydrological, operational, economic, or legal. This will create a common and agreed-upon data set that can be used by negotiators to make the difficult decisions.
- Decisions regarding allocation and use of water resources must be based in existing state and interstate water law and recognize the realities of hydrologic cycles in the Basin. A commitment to work within the framework of existing appropriative systems, rather than pursuing a new system that circumvents current water rights allocation and administration, provides the only certainty required to make responsible, long-term water management decisions.
- Existing supplies from the River need to be augmented in a strategic way, and new water supply should be considered to meet growing urban demands in place of targeting reallocation of low-cost sources including transfer of agricultural water. The coalition believes, at a minimum, development of new water supply must include:
  - Recycling and desalination;
  - Local storage, including groundwater storage produced by strategic irrigation practices, and;
  - Importation from adjacent basins.

- Active forest restoration can increase water yield, improve water quality, and prevent further sedimentation of storage reservoirs in the Basin. Partnership-driven restoration projects also provide jobs, reduce the cost of firefighting, and increase forest resiliency. For the water management benefits of health forests to be realized, land and water managers must:
  - Increase the pace and scale of forest treatments;
  - Employ grazing as an effective, affordable forest and grassland management tool;
  - Improve access to National Forest System and other affected federal lands;
  - Expedite environmental reviews to support active restoration efforts, and;
  - Refine the measurement and quantification of improved water yields and water quality, and utilize that data in developing forest health priorities.
- Protecting the Salton Sea while working to increase efficiency of water use will be necessary for any basin-wide Colorado River solutions.
- Environmental water releases need to be held to the same standards for efficiency and accountability as required of urban and agricultural uses. If an environmental water release is not accomplishing the objectives for which it was intended, it should be reconsidered.
- Impacts to federal hydropower need to be recognized and considered and decisions makers should work to safeguard its value and benefits in the new Guidelines.

The factors above are encompassed in eight foundational principles outlined below that the agriculture sector believes Colorado River Compact decision-makers must incorporate in operating guidelines. These principles are further detailed in the body of this white paper.

1. Recognize that Western irrigated agriculture is a strategic and irreplaceable national resource.
2. Provide certainty to all users and interests with Compact equitable apportionment decisions made from a foundation of common sense and fairness.
3. Address critical data gaps to facilitate the trust needed to make fair operational and legal decisions related to the next set of Interim Guidelines.
4. Manage Lake Mead to provide the Lower Basin's share of the Colorado River Compact water to Lower Basin users. Manage Lake Powell to meet both the Colorado Compact obligations to the Lower Basin and protect the Upper Colorado River Compact entitlement of the four Upper Basin states.
5. Expand water supply augmentation opportunities as options for meeting growing water demands, at a time when Colorado River supplies appear to be diminishing.
6. Emphasize that future urban growth cannot be encouraged without locking in sustainable and diverse water supplies.
7. Recognize and address the impacts of drought and Colorado River management on Federal hydropower, its customers and related programs, and the resiliency of the power grid.
8. Include substantive measures to minimize and mitigate any anticipated negative economic, environmental and cultural impacts to rural communities due to reduced irrigated agriculture and more efficient irrigation practices.

*Approved unanimously by Family Farm Alliance board of directors on March 11, 2022.*