Issue #2623
August 23, 2024

Western States Water

Addressing Water Needs and Strategies for a Sustainable Future

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ADMINISTRATION/WATER RESOURCES

USBR/Colorado River

On August 15, the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation (USBR) released its Colorado River Basin 24-month study for August, setting operations for January 2025. Lakes Powell and Mead have a combined storage capacity of 37%. Lake Powell will operate in a Mid-Elevation Release Tier in water year 2025, and Lake Mead will operate in a Level 1 Shortage Condition with required shortages by Arizona and Nevada, coupled with Lower Basin Drought Contingency Plan (DCP) water savings contributions, in calendar year (CY) 2025. The three Lower Basin States have already conserved the 1.5 million acre-feet (MAF) promised by the end of 2024, avoiding crisis-level shortages and allowing operations to continue as they were throughout CY24.

The study projects Lake Powell's elevation to be 3,574 feet, about 126 feet below full pool and about 84 feet above the minimum level needed to generate hydroelectric power. Under the Mid-Elevation Release Tier, Lake Powell is projected to release 7.48 MAF water in 2025. Lake Mead's Level 1 Shortage Condition is based on a projected January 1 elevation of 1,062 feet, about 13 feet below the Lower Basin shortage determination trigger of 1,075 feet. The 2007 Interim Guidelines, the 2019 Lower Basin DCP, and Minute 323 to the 1944 Water Treaty with Mexico require shortage reductions and water savings contributions of: (1) 512,000 acre-feet (AF) from Arizona, 18% of the State's annual apportionment; (2) 21,000 AF from Nevada , 7% of the State's annual apportionment; and (3) 80,000 AF from Mexico, 5% of the country's annual apportionment.

DOI/NASA/Landsat Next/FY26 Appropriations

On August 16, WSWC sent a letter to the leadership of the U.S. Department of the Interior (DOI) and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) urging prioritization of Landsat Next in the FY26 budget. WSWC emphasized the economic and environmental benefits of the mission, and outlined specific applications of Landsat data including mapping irrigated lands and crop type, mapping surface and groundwater use, administering water rights, informing water market opportunities, administering and monitoring negotiated interstate agreements, estimating water-use by invasive species, and projecting wildfire risks. WSWC also highlighted its intention to integrate OpenET data with its Water Data Exchange (WaDE) as a measure of consumptive use, and the importance of NASA's thermal infrared (TIR) data to that work.

The letter reads: "There is an urgent need to accelerate, not delay, funding decisions in order to ensure there are no future data gaps. Uncertainty regarding future funding and TIR data availability has in the past been an obstacle to building operational water resources planning, monitoring and management programs. The western water community worked hard to secure a place for the TIR imager on both Landsat 8 and Landsat 9, and we will continue to work to ensure Landsat Next guarantees TIR imagery remains available…. We expect to see further uninterrupted innovations in water management based on NASA's TIR data from Landsat Next, with USGS operating the next generation satellites and archiving the data, as long as the data continues to be available at no cost to users. The WSWC strongly supports a continuing National Land Imaging Program and expresses our strong support for the approval and construction of the Landsat Next mission without delay."

NOAA/NIDIS/Drought

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) National Integrated Drought Information System (NIDIS) announced funding up to $4M for 8 two-year projects on August 12. The NIDIS Coping with Drought competition seeks projects focused on improving drought indicator performance to account for non-stationarity with the goal of more accurate drought assessments that support communities in preparing for, mitigating, and responding to drought. In FY25, approximately $2M will be available for the first year of funding, pending appropriations. NIDIS anticipates a funding level of $50,000-$250,000 per year over two years for most projects. The competition addresses needs identified in a memorandum titled Drought Assessment in a Changing Climate: Priority Actions and Research Needs (WSW #2586).

Example research questions included: (1) How well do current drought indices depict drought conditions, and are they effective given regional differences in non-stationarity? (2) How is the regional variability of drought indicators and indices changing over time, with climate change? (3) How can existing or new drought indicators or indices (e.g., snowpack, groundwater, etc.) be utilized or adapted to improve drought assessment and predictability in a changing climate? (4) Where low-frequency, high-intensity precipitation events are becoming more common, how are these events reflected in drought indicators and/or indices, and how does this impact drought assessment temporally and spatially? and (5) How can drought indices better reflect how the intensity of an event affects drought conditions?

CONGRESS

Nevada/Water Summit

On August 14, Representative Susie Lee (D-NV) hosted her second annual water summit in Las Vegas with national and regional water leaders to discuss water related ideas, solutions, and research. Lee highlighted that $141M from the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act has been allocated for 20 water projects across Nevada since the law was passed. Lee was joined by Bureau of Reclamation Commissioner Camille Calimlim Touton, Southern Nevada Water Authority General Manager John Entsminger, and National Drought Mitigation Center Director Dr. Mark Svoboda. Touton said that the 2023 plan between Arizona, Nevada, and California to conserve 3 MAF of water over three years is ahead of schedule, having now reached 1.7 MAF.

Lee said: “No one knows better than a Nevadan just how precious our water resources are. I brought today’s coalition together because our water conservation is an all-hands-on-deck effort that demands cooperation from our local advocates all the way to our leaders in Washington. Today's water summit was all about ideas, solutions, and research that can help Nevada as we face the effects of the worst drought in twelve centuries. I will continue working in Congress to ensure that our partners have the resources needed to carry on their good work here in Nevada and across the Colorado River Basin.”

Touton said: “There is proof here that we can take on these hard moments, but we have to do it together. We’ve been able to stabilize the system in the short term, and now we are focused on what this river looks like for the future…. Addressing the drought crisis requires an all-hands-on-deck approach and that’s exactly what we saw at today’s summit. Together, we can find solutions to meet the challenges of these unprecedented drought conditions.”

CONGRESS/WATER RESOURCES

WRDA/Water Supply Mission

On August 14, WSWC sent a letter to leadership of the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works and House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, expressing interest in Section 121 of the Water Resources Development Act (WRDA) (H.R. 8812). The section would elevate water supply as a co-equal primary mission where it is a congressionally-authorized project purpose. WSWC wrote that the change could create opportunities for greater federal-state cooperation. WSWC emphasized appreciation for provisions clarifying that the change does not authorize the Army Corps of Engineers to affect the authority of states to manage, use, or allocate water resources (WSW #2607).

On August 16, the Association of California Water Agencies, the Association of Metropolitan Water Agencies, the National Water Resources Association, the National Water Supply Alliance (NWSA), the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, and the WateReuse Association, sent a letter supporting the inclusion of Section 121 in the final conference version of WRDA. The coalition wrote that this would enhance the work already underway to prepare for future supply challenges, and would ensure that the Corps fully engages in meeting vital water supply needs, without affecting existing authorities. They wrote: “The Army Corps is one of the nation’s largest water suppliers with 6.2 MAF of contracted water supply. Across America, 136 Army Corps reservoirs provide municipal and industrial water supply, and 46 reservoirs provide irrigation water supply…. The nation has benefitted from these projects, but the dual challenges of population growth and climate variability require that more be done…. Section 121 would not authorize the Secretary to initiate any new water resources development projects or modify any existing project without authorization from Congress. In addition, Section 121 specifically states it would not affect the authority of states to manage, use, or allocate water resources. Section 121 is a common-sense, forward-thinking provision that is needed to avoid future water shortages and build smart, modern, resilient infrastructure.”

On August 16, the NWSA sent an independent letter urging the Senate-House conference committee to include Section 121 in the final bill. They noted that it would help ensure adequate staffing, resources, and operational tools to critical water supply uses at Corps projects. They wrote: “It will reduce the bureaucratic, regulatory drag that effectively deprioritizes water supply across the Nation. It provides clear congressional direction that water supply should not be dismissed or put aside due to terminology.”