



WESTERN STATES WATER

Addressing water needs and strategies for a sustainable future.

Issue #2700
June 15, 2026

Chair - Julie Cunningham; Executive Director - J.D. Strong; Editor - Elysse Ostlund Campbell

CONGRESS/WATER RESOURCES

FY2027 Appropriations/ Energy and Water Development

On May 20, 2026, the House Appropriations Committee advanced the FY27 Energy and Water Development and Related Agencies Appropriations Bill (H.R. 9022) in a 34-25 vote.¹ Totalling \$58.5B in discretionary funding, the bill provides a \$461M increase over FY26 levels. Chairman Tom Cole (R-OK) stated: "The FY27 Energy and Water bill bolsters energy sources, energy technology, and energy growth.... Investments in inland and coastal navigation, flood control, and drought resilience projects further protect public safety and keep American commerce moving."

The bill provides \$9.77B for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) Civil Works. This includes \$175M for USACE investigations into river, harbor, flood, and aquatic ecosystem needs and feasibility. Construction receives \$2.38B, dedicating \$1.29B to flood and storm damage reduction and \$417.2M to ongoing inland waterway projects. Operations and maintenance (O&M) gets \$6.255B, including \$164.4M for existing USACE projects and \$3.564B from the Harbor Maintenance Trust Fund for coastal and inland harbors. USACE receives \$40M for flood and coastal emergencies and \$5M to administer the Corps Water Infrastructure Finance and Innovation Program (CWIFP).

The Department of the Interior (DOI) receives \$1.86B, comprising \$23M for the Central Utah Project Completion Account and \$1.84B for the Bureau of Reclamation's (USBR) primary Water and Related Resources account. USBR funding includes \$201M for Water Infrastructure Improvements for the Nation (WIIN) Act water storage projects and \$32M for California Bay-Delta Restoration activities. The bill also raises funding ceilings for critical USBR infrastructure grants, adjusting limits to \$177.5M for the Wastewater and Groundwater Study and Facilities Act and \$106.5M for the Water Desalination Act of 1996.

Finally, the bill directs \$859.157M in Community Project Funding (CPF) to fulfill 71 specific USACE and USBR project requests made by 62 members of Congress. [Click here](#) to see the details of all proposed CPF in western states.²

Senate Energy and Natural Resources

On June 10, the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee convened to mark up pending legislation, with debate centering heavily on the Wildfire Prevention Act (S. 140).³ The underlying bill was originally designed to expedite environmental reviews, increase annual federal forest-thinning and prescribed burn goals by 40%, and expand official wildfire mitigation toolset to include the use of commercial timber harvesting and livestock grazing.

Shortly before the markup, Senator Mike Lee (R-UT) introduced an Amendment in the Nature of a Substitute that controversially repealed the 2001 Roadless Area Conservation Rule. The 2001 rule broadly prohibits road construction and commercial logging across "inventoried roadless areas," allowing exceptions for imminent catastrophic threats, valid existing legal rights, and targeted vegetation treatments to improve forest health.

Democratic members opposed the amendment, warning that repealing the Roadless Rule could degrade regional water quality and increase catastrophic wildfire risks. Senator Alex Padilla (D-CA) emphasized that roadless areas are critical for keeping the headwaters of vital rivers clean, while Senator Ron Wyden (D-OR) cited a 2026 study indicating that human-caused wildfire ignitions are roughly four times higher near established roads. Democratic amendments to strike the Roadless Rule repeal and restore firefighter workforce benefits failed, and the committee advanced the amended S. 140 on an 11-9 party-line vote.

Members from both parties reaffirmed the committee's underlying collaborative nature. Senator Jim Risch (R-ID) noted that while outsiders might assume the two sides are deeply

divided, “Every time we have worked on these there’s very little daylight between us, and almost always there’s some middle ground that you can get to.” Echoing this sentiment, Senator Alex Padilla (D-CA) highlighted recent bipartisan successes but expressed frustration with the day’s proceedings, stating: “For folks watching at home, this committee may not be as divided as it appears to be today... and I think that’s why I’m so dispirited with today’s committee hearing, because that goodwill is being undermined by what we saw happen and how it happened.”

The committee successfully approved several water and energy measures by unanimous voice vote. To advance hydropower modernization, the committee passed the Hydropower Licensing Transparency Act (S. 3500) to require FERC to submit annual reports on the status of ongoing relicensing applications. The Committee also approved the Futureproofing Local Operations for Water Systems (FLOWS) Act (S. 3518). This measure allows existing facilities to bypass a lengthy federal review process for routine, minor upkeep, letting operators make standard repairs without filing formal license amendments. It also establishes a faster permitting process for micro hydrokinetic energy projects.

Several planning and drought-resilience initiatives also advanced. The Committee approved the Large-Scale Water Recycling Reauthorization Act (S. 3693), which extends competitive Bureau of Reclamation grants to fund massive water reuse infrastructure across the West. It also advanced the Dakota Water Resources Act Amendments (S. 4040) to increase funding ceilings for municipal, rural, and industrial water supply grants in North Dakota and its five Tribal Nations. The Committee greenlit critical feasibility studies authorizing federal assessments for the Western South Dakota Water Supply Project (S. 3723) and the Dakota Mainstem Water Supply Project (S. 3736).

The Water Project Navigators Act (S. 3792/H. R. 7408) passed, establishing a Bureau of Reclamation program that funds dedicated “navigator” positions. These roles will provide grant writing, project management, and technical assistance to states, Tribes, and rural communities seeking federal water conservation and infrastructure funding.

On water data, the committee advanced the Snow Water Supply Forecasting Program Reauthorization Act (S. 2437/ H.R. 3857), which reauthorizes funding through 2031 to deploy emerging airborne and satellite monitoring

technologies that improve downstream water predictability. Senator Hickenlooper thanked committee leadership for advancing water management tools, stressing that addressing severe drought means building water managers’ capacity to develop projects, and staying at the cutting edge of forecasting by understanding snowpack.

Referencing the Water Project Navigators Act and the Snow Water Supply Forecasting Reauthorization Act, he said: “In a year like this one we have to make the most of every drop. The Ute Mountain Tribe, in southwestern corner of Colorado, is expected to receive less than 14% of its typical water allocation or supply. This year, that’s a dramatic cut that we see play out on the fields of the Tribes’ farms and ripples across the state’s and the region’s economy. We see the severity of this crisis in farms in the communities across the Colorado River Basin.... In the basin, we’re breaking records for how low we can go. Projected inflows into Lake Powell will be roughly 35% of normal for this water year.”

Several other water bills, initially published on the Committee agenda, were ultimately excluded from the final voting roster including the Water Security and Drought Resilience Act (S. 3732) and the San Joaquin River Restoration Settlement Act (S. 1413). Other unaddressed priorities included various canal and ditch maintenance measures (S. 365/H.R. 1729 and S. 2753) and Wild and Scenic Rivers designations for the Smith River, OR (S. 945), Gila River, NM (S. 1476), and Wild Olympics, WA (S. 1737).

Senate Energy and Natural Resources/ Colorado River

Following the markup, the committee transitioned to an oversight hearing regarding the management of the Colorado River Basin. Lawmakers and witnesses underscored the hydrologic reality the system faces—now in its 27th year of historic drought, with total storage falling to roughly 34% of capacity and Lake Powell hovering near 25%. The hearing focused on the urgent need for a successor agreement before the October 2026 expiration of current operating guidelines.

Chairman Mike Lee defended the Upper Basin, criticizing the “increasingly unhelpful rhetoric” and litigation preparations from some Lower Basin states. He cautioned that Congress will use its Compact Clause authority to heavily scrutinize any framework ignoring Upper Basin

realities, stating, “States that choose to sue their fellow basin states over Colorado River operations should not expect Congress to reward that decision with additional federal funding.” Ranking Member Martin Heinrich emphasized the urgent need for a 7-state consensus, expressing concern that the Department of the Interior (DOI) is too focused on short-term triage rather than forging a durable long-term framework. He strongly advocated for investments in natural infrastructure, such as forest resilience and watershed restoration, to protect the water supply at its source.

Assistant Secretary for Water and Science Andrea Travnicek detailed emergency steps the Department of the Interior (DOI) has taken to address the crisis, including reducing Glen Canyon Dam releases and augmenting flows from Flaming Gorge. In the absence of a unified state proposal, the DOI is advancing a 10-year operational framework—expected to be finalized via a final environmental impact statement and a record of decision before mid-August. The plan establishes permanent “principles and sideboards” while requiring specific operations for Lakes Mead and Powell, to be renegotiated every two years. Instead of relying on long-term modeling, the framework utilizes “hydrology-responsive operations” tied to real-time conditions. Although the detailed plan is not yet publicly available, key provisions include up to 3 million acre-feet of shortage capacity for the Lower Basin, flexible Lake Powell releases ranging from 5 to 12 million acre-feet, and expanded Intentionally Created Surplus (ICS) capacity. Emphasizing this shift to real-time management, Travnicek noted, “Mother Nature is here, she’s showing us where the water is or is not, and we’re going to have to work together.”

When pressed by Chairman Lee about restoring water released from Flaming Gorge and other upper initial units, Travnicek affirmed that recovery is a priority. Senator Catherine Cortez Masto confirmed with Travnicek that the DOI possesses the authority under the Drought Response Operation Agreement to operate these units without Upper Basin consensus if necessary. Travnicek provided a strict schedule: the environmental document is targeted for the end of July, followed shortly by a record of decision, with the operating agreement in place by October 1.

Dispelling rumors of \$1 billion in remaining conservation funding, Travnicek clarified the actual balances. The DOI has less than \$100M in Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) dollars remaining ahead of a September 30 obligation deadline,

alongside \$240M in Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) funds it aims to obligate swiftly.

In response to Senator Cortez Masto, Travnicek expressed the department’s support for the Northeastern Arizona Indian Water Rights Settlement Act, stating that Indian water rights settlements provide necessary sovereignty and certainty that benefit the entire basin.

Senator John Hickenlooper noted the Lower Basin has received \$2B in investments compared to the \$200M the Upper Basin has received. Travnicek responded that Lower Basin funding quickly propped up Lake Mead through immediate conservation, whereas the Upper Basin has historically cited a lack of scalable voluntary conservation opportunities that yield immediate system benefits, though new programs in Utah and Wyoming are changing this.

Amy Haas of the Colorado River Authority of Utah urged Congress to withhold federal funds from litigating states to “fund solutions, not lawsuits,” while demanding formalized credit for Upper Basin conservation and strict recovery mandates for emergency upstream releases. Speaking to Lower Basin dynamics, Bill Hasencamp of the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California argued that achieving a seven-state consensus requires strict federal deadlines, flexible conservation, and matching funds, pointing to California’s historic 20% reduction under past federal pressure. To support these systemic shifts, Tom Kiernan of American Rivers highlighted a diverse coalition’s request for \$2B in near-term funding to prioritize cost-effective “natural infrastructure,” such as forest resilience and wetland restoration, to naturally capture snowmelt and mitigate wildfire risks.

MEETINGS

Western Regional Partnership

On May 28-29, the Western Regional Partnership (WRP) met in Deer Valley Utah to discuss national security issues related to water, wildfire, and air space. The purpose of the WRP is to provide a collaborative framework for the Department of Defense, federal, state, and tribal leadership. It works to protect natural and cultural resources while promoting military readiness, sustainability, and homeland security across Arizona, California, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, and Utah.

The first panel brought together experts from federal and state agencies to discuss the critical intersection of water security, resilience, and

national security. Moderated by Blake Bingham, Deputy State Engineer, Utah Division of Water Rights, panelists included Rob Manning, National Programs Directorate, Bureau of Reclamation; Samantha Arthur, Deputy Secretary for Water, California Natural Resources Agency; Cody Stewart, Director of Strategic Engagement for the Colorado River Authority of Utah; and Stephen Bartell, Assistant Chief, Natural Resources Section, Environment & Natural Resources Division Department of Justice. The panelists emphasized that water availability underpins military readiness, economic stability, and public health.

Manning highlighted that water systems are increasingly vulnerable to drought, aging infrastructure, and cyber threats. Because water management spans federal, state, tribal, and local jurisdictions, collaboration is essential for solving "wicked problems" that no single entity can address alone. He explained his current focus on dam safety, infrastructure, power resources, and emergency preparedness, noting that the Bureau of Reclamation serves as a critical wholesale water and hydropower supplier for the 17 western states. Drawing on his military background, he emphasized the importance of redundancy, interagency coordination, and rapid response in managing water and power networks. Manning argued that it is critical to modernize infrastructure at pace, accelerate basin management, and strengthen regional partnerships.

Arthur highlighted the whiplash effect of California's changing hydrology, noting a shift from the driest three-year period on record (2020–2022) to an extremely wet start to 2023 with seven atmospheric rivers. She emphasized that a significant portion of winter precipitation is falling as rain rather than accumulating as snowpack, which necessitates major changes in water management. She noted that California must adapt by expanding water storage to capture rain more effectively, as the state can no longer rely on snowpack to act as a natural reservoir. She explained that the state has created infrastructure strike teams to coordinate across permitting agencies and reduce bureaucratic delays, as well as reforms to environmental quality acts to provide project certainty. She identified groundwater regulation as a significant water security challenge. After being the last Western state to regulate groundwater, California is now focused on local leadership and management of resources, with the state providing oversight and acting as a backstop. Water management in California—which involves complex federal, state, local, and tribal systems—is too interconnected to

solve alone. She emphasized the necessity of data quality, reliable forecasting, and collaborative planning to ensure resilience.

Stewart noted that water security isn't just an abstract concept; it has direct, tangible impacts on people's daily lives, including electricity bills, food prices, and municipal development. The Colorado River basin is in a "really bad spot," with water flow declining over the last 20 years and reservoir levels in Lake Powell and Lake Mead dropping by 70% since 1999. He described the basin's water crisis not as a result of bad-faith actors, but as a "tragedy of the commons." He explained that while individual cities, states, and users are making rational decisions for their specific scale, the aggregate effect of these decisions is unsustainable. He emphasized the urgent need for political resilience to find a resolution, noting that the window for a negotiated agreement is closing quickly. When asked how to build statewide consensus, Stewart emphasized that disagreements are often based on real, foundational perspectives that must be respected. He identified misinformation—perceptions of reality that are inaccurate—as a major hurdle. He stressed that educating stakeholders, particularly farmers and ranchers, takes significant time, consistent dialogue, and the development of trust. Stewart warned that the "status quo" is not sustainable and that future water access will likely either decrease, become significantly more expensive, or both. He expressed hope that technology and AI might eventually provide ways to get better utilization out of existing water supplies. Additionally, he encouraged every state to establish dedicated outreach roles (similar to his own) to improve communication with military and community partners.

Bartell explained the DOJ's role in litigating water rights for federal agencies, noting that while negotiation and settlement are preferred paths to avoid decades-long adjudication, legal certainty remains fundamental to securing water for military and national defense needs. Because water rights are property rights, securing them is essential for national security and military readiness. Federal agencies obtain these rights either by asserting federal reserved water rights (based on the purpose for which a base was established) or by complying with state-based permits and licenses. A significant hurdle for the DOJ is the need to educate both federal leadership—who are often not from the West and may not grasp the complexities of water rights—and the general public. There is a persistent need to explain why federal agencies, especially the military, require water for more than just basic consumption, such

as supporting agriculture and maintaining the ability to fight wildfires, even when such needs face public or political resistance.

Participants from the audience underscored that agriculture is a critical component of national security (food security) rather than just a target of resource criticism. There is a need to balance agricultural needs with urban and municipal growth.

The water security panel discussed the growing impact of data centers on water resources. Bingham noted that while some centers are less consumptive than older designs, transparency in reporting and understanding their long-term water demands—especially regarding location-specific water stress—are ongoing challenges for regulators. Arthur distinguished between “hardened demand” and users with more flexibility. She noted that sectors like agriculture have demonstrated an ability to flex and use less water during acute drought periods, which is an important consideration for overall resource security.

A second panel, moderated by Jack Waldorf, Executive Director, Western Governors’ Association, addressed response and prevention issues related to wildland fires. Panelists included Sarah Fisher, Forest Service’s Deputy Chief for Fire and Aviation Management, Safety, and Employee Well-being; Chris Wilcox, Deputy Chief for Fire Readiness and Training, US Wildland Fire Service, US Department of the Interior; and Paul Matheis, U.S. Fire Administrator, U.S. Fire Administration.

Both the Forest Service and the Department of the Interior (DOI) are streamlining their fire management. The Forest Service is moving its headquarters to Utah and aligning its programs with interagency geographic structures, while the DOI has unified its various bureaus into a single Wildland Fire Service to create clearer line authority from the top down. A primary challenge remains the jurisdictional patchwork of state, federal, tribal, and local land management. Inconsistent rules, funding streams, and decision timelines often create inefficiencies, making effective mutual aid difficult to execute in practice. The panelists advocated for moving away from seeing one another as “stakeholders” to a model of true “partnership,” noting that an “all-of-nation” approach is required because wildfires do not respect arbitrary jurisdictional lines.

The panelists emphasized that “fire season” is an outdated concept, as wildfires are now a

year-round occurrence across the West, which complicates both operational preparedness and staffing. The group discussed the difficult balance between funding immediate fire suppression and long-term mitigation or technology projects. They stressed the need for consistent, shared data and technology across agencies rather than siloed, agency-specific solutions. Agencies are also placing a higher priority on firefighter mental health, wage increases, and recruitment. There is also a shift toward considering year-round employment models to improve retention.

Members of the audience also noted the importance of specialized support, including dedicated fire weather cadres from the National Weather Service, defense support from the Army, and state-funded programs like California’s Task Force Rattlesnake.

WEBINARS

Summer Series

In addition to the **July 13–16 WSWC Virtual Summer (210th) Meetings**, the Council is hosting supplemental webinars. These optional presentations aim to build technical knowledge and encourage peer-to-peer sharing. For more meeting information and registration links, visit westernstateswater.org/events/wswc-summer-210th-meetings/.

The Summer Series schedule is as follows:

June 16th at 12 pm MDT– (WestFAST) NASA’s Water Resources Program: Supporting Water Management in the U.S. West and Beyond, Perry Oddo and Sean Fleming

July 9th at 1 pm MDT– (WestFAST) Overview of Water Rights Litigation Nation Wide, Stephen Bartell, Department of Justice.

July 22nd at 11:00 am MDT– (WSWC) Forecast Informed Reservoir Operations: National Screening Update, Cary Talbot, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

REFERENCES

¹ House Committee on Appropriations - Republicans “Committee Approves FY27 Energy and Water Development Appropriations Act.” May 20, 2026. <https://appropriations.house.gov/news/press-releases/committee-approves-fy27-energy-and-water-development-appropriations-act>.

² U.S. Congress, House, “Energy and Water Development and Related Agencies Appropriations Bill, 2027, H. Rept. 119-667,” 2026, <https://www.congress.gov/committee-report/119th-congress/house-report/667>.

³ U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, “Business Meeting to Consider Pending Legislation,” June 10, 2026, <https://www.energy.senate.gov/hearings/2026/6/business-meeting-to-consider-pending-legislation>