



Dolores River Boating Advocates

Dolores River Boating Advocates
PO Box 1173
Dolores, Colorado 81323

Dear Carly Jerla,

I am submitting the following comments on behalf of the Dolores River Boating Advocates (DRBA) regarding Post-2026 Colorado River Reservoir Operational Strategies. DRBA is a small 501(c)(3) organization based in Dolores, Colorado, whose mission is to protect and enrich the recreational and ecological values of the Dolores River through advocacy, stewardship and education. Our main focus, the Dolores River, is an Upper Basin tributary to the Colorado and therefore an integral part of the overall Colorado River system.

We have organized our comments into the sections: the first addresses procedures or stakeholder process that may best engage diverse interests, particularly in the Upper Basin states. Secondly, we lay out ideas that may help with the substantive aspects of future Colorado River Basin operations and management in the long-term. Third, we consider a few data gaps that should be filled and funding needs for programs to help implement programs and mitigate challenges.

The overarching theme of the 2026 Annual Operating Plan should be adapting to climate change in the long-term, in a manner that is equitable to all human communities and the ecological integrity of the river itself.

I. Processes & Engagement Strategies

a. BoR should be involved with the Upper Basin's Five-Part Plan:

To have the most effective and equitable outcome of reducing water use in the Colorado River Basin, all water users and interests must be consulted via localized scoping meetings. Programs that the Upper Colorado River Basin states outlined in [their five-part plan](#), such as System Conservation Pilot Program (SCPP), and Demand Management are tangible examples of where BOR should participate to provide additional resources, accountability, and consistency in implementation between states, because these programs will need to be significantly scaled up to make a difference ([UCRC 2020 Report](#).)

Putting federal resources into designing and implementing these processes and subsequent programs alongside the states and irrigators could help ensure transparency between local communities and the federal government, implement local solutions with multiple benefits, and better understand the cost of many potential programs moving forward.

For example, agriculture is by far the largest user of water in the Dolores River watershed, and the drought has been immensely challenging on many farmers



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(particularly those with junior water rights,) and the river itself, who's ecosystem is dying. In this way, there may be both an economic and ecological benefit to compensated water transfers (temporary or permanent) in the sub-basin, however, any program must be developed with local leadership and input.

Demand Management, SCPP, and other programs that are voluntary, temporary and compensated have been studied at length by the federal government, academics, and NGOs, therefore BOR should ensure those lessons learned are understood before engaging in similar processes.

We recognize these meetings and processes could easily take years to come to tangible solutions, so initial scoping and fine-tuning frameworks should happen as soon as possible. Furthermore, BoR should hire additional staff to help organize, facilitate, and implement these programs.

b. Prioritize engagement with Tribal nations and upholding treaty rights:

Given that the at least 30 unique Tribal Nations in the Basin that collectively hold rights to around 25% of the river, it is imperative that BoR and the Colorado River Basin states engage with Tribes consistently and incorporate their feedback into the new guidelines. Furthermore, installing infrastructure to ensure all Tribal nations have clean running water should be a priority for the federal government.

c. Utilize basin-wide NEPA processes for new 2026 Operational Guidelines:

All major changes that fall outside the scope of current operational plans and decisions should trigger a new NEPA process. Furthermore, any new environmental assessments need to consider the impacts of climate change on streamflow, snowpack, and greenhouse gas emissions. This process should be comprehensive and include both the Upper and Lower Basins, and be well-staffed by federal agencies.

d. Address the underlying over-allocation problem:

It has been argued that the Colorado River was over-allocated as early as the 20th century ([Fleck and Castle, 2022](#).) Since the mega-drought started in 2000, the system has been clearly over-drawn and not sustainable. To this end, it is critical that the processes the BoR leads both before and after 2026 operational discussions include permanent cuts to water use, particularly in the Lower Basin states.

Furthermore, on state and watershed levels, it may be prudent to create frameworks that consider a percentage-based allocation system rather than static amounts based on the available amount of water. In this manner, water may be put to better uses and allow flexibility to water users. In Nevada, [the state Supreme Court has allowed a localized plan](#) that supersedes prior appropriation in regards to managing aquifers, which may set a precedent moving forward.



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II. Operational & Management Strategies

- a. Maximize ecological health with tributary management:
The health of rivers and streams making up the Colorado and Green River is extremely important, and BoR should consider tributary health more explicitly in the post 2026 operational guidelines. This includes considering the health of aquatic species, as well as habitat and flow management.
- b. Increase water quantification technology:
BOR should work with the states to install additional gauges and water quantification instruments on as many streams, diversions, and ditches as possible; and provide funding and labor to ensure they are maintained. This will be critical to understand where and how water is used, as well as address the stewarding problem associated with demand management.
- c. Subsidize local food production and discourage sending products overseas:
Given how agriculture is by far the largest use of water in the Colorado River Basin, it will be important to intervene in agricultural markets and international sales of crops. Much of the crops grown in the basin are sold overseas, functionally transporting water and soil out of the Colorado River Basin.

Creating subsidies and incentives to keep food in the United States will be an important component to the sustainability of water use in the Colorado River Basin.

- d. Cap water development in the Upper Basin:
BOR and Wheeler et al (2022) have both found that additional Upper Basin development would add continued pressure to the Colorado River System. No additional development should be allowed, unless water savings are made up for elsewhere in the same watershed. In other words, consider the current level of stored water in each state and watershed the maximum allowable amount, and if alternative storage is found to be a better use of water, than previously stored water would be sent downstream.

III. Additional Data & Federal Funding Needs

- a. Crop inventory for all Colorado River Basin states:
BOR should work with USDA and other state and federal agencies to create reports that summarize crop type and use associated with the Colorado River.
- b. Fund farmland and riparian restoration:
Assuming programs that fund farmers to fallow fields temporarily or permanently will be implemented in the coming years, it will be important to consider funding for restoration. If fields are to come out of production, helping farmers with costs such as seed is critical to help improve the quality of the land in an uncultivated and natural state.



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- I. Tributaries – Particularly in the Upper Basin, tributaries are vital in the health of the overall system and contribute significant water, aquatic habitat connectivity, and support diverse rural communities. As part of the 2026 Colorado River Operational Guidelines, tributaries should be addressed.
 - Ensure water quantification technology is installed on as many streams, diversions, and ditches as possible, and provide funding and labor to ensure they are maintained.
 - Prioritize tributary connectivity to the mainstem Colorado and Green Rivers (both in terms barriers and sufficient streamflow.)
 - Reclamation should address each major Upper Basin tributary with a federal nexus (i.e., communities that receive water from a federal project) individually. By addressing each major tributary individually, it would acknowledge their differences and quantify of shortages they are able to contribute. This would help clarify vague expectations on how individual water users and tributaries need to contribute to the 2-4 million-acre-foot cuts.
- II. Ensure a natural flow regime is maintained throughout tributaries & increase money for restoration
 - Provide guidance for how to manage reservoir flow regimes (e.g., consider the amount of inflow and % outflow to mimic natural variability albeit reduced proportionally for diversions)
 - Bookmark funding for leasing water for ecological purposes.

[EXTERNAL] Comments for 87 FR 37884 - Post-2026 Colorado River Reservoir
Operational strategies

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Thu 8/18/2022 8:22 AM

To: CRB-Info, BOR <bor-sha-LCB-Info@usbr.gov>

📎 1 attachments (628 KB)

CO_River_Operational_Comments_DRBA.pdf;

This email has been received from outside of DOI - Use caution before clicking on links, downloading attachments, or responding.

No comments; see letter attached.

Dear Carly Jerla and Reclamation staff,

Please find comments (attached) associated with 87 FR 37884 regarding the Post-2026 Colorado River Reservoir Operational Strategies from the Dolores River Boating Advocates, a 501c3 located in Dolores, Colorado.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit comments for this important process,

Rica Fulton

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Rica Fulton

Advocacy and Stewardship Director

Dolores River Boating Advocates

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