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20 E Main St Suite 750
PO Box 1466
Mesa, Arizona 85211-1466

March 2, 2026

United States Bureau of Reclamation
Attn: BCOO-1000
P.O. Box 61470
Boulder City, Nevada 89006

Via email to: crbpost2026@usbr.gov

**Re: Comments on Draft Environmental Impact Statement – Post-2026 Operational Guidelines for Lake Powell and Lake Mead (91 Fed. Reg. 2131)**

Dear Acting Commission Scott J Cameron and USBR partners,

The City of Mesa appreciates the opportunity to comment on the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) dated January 2026 for Post-2026 Operational Guidelines and Strategies for Lake Powell and Lake Mead.

Mesa is Arizona's third largest city and one of the largest municipal water providers in the Colorado River Basin. Our community was founded and has grown in reliance upon Colorado River water delivered through the Central Arizona Project (CAP). Colorado River supplies are not a supplemental source for Mesa - they are foundational to our municipal system, our economy, and our future.

Water is the foundation of Mesa and of the communities throughout the Phoenix metropolitan region. The Colorado River is a critical supply that sustains homes, schools, higher education institutions, hospitals, public safety operations, advanced manufacturing, high-tech industries, and regional employment centers. The reliability of CAP water underpins public health, economic stability, and quality of life for hundreds of thousands of Mesa residents.

Mesa relies heavily on Colorado River water delivered through CAP, which supplies approximately 55–60% of the City's total annual water use. We concur with the DEIS's acknowledgment that Colorado River supplies, and those that depend upon them, face significant risk and that past agreements and actions have not been sufficient to prevent declining storage in Lake Mead and Lake Powell. The City of Mesa recognizes the seriousness of the hydrologic challenges facing the Basin.

For decades, Mesa has embraced and institutionalized a desert-adapted water management philosophy. Recognizing that we live in an arid environment with finite supplies, the City has deliberately structured its water portfolio around conservation, renewable surface water supplies, aquifer recharge, and advanced effluent reuse. Mesa has invested heavily in long-term conservation programming, smart metering technology, system efficiency improvements, groundwater recharge facilities, and beneficial reuse projects to ensure that water is managed responsibly and sustainably in a desert climate.

These desert-lifestyle planning decisions directly informed the billions of dollars Mesa has invested in renewable water infrastructure premised on the availability of Colorado River supplies under the Law of the River. Our system was intentionally designed to maximize renewable surface water use and reduce reliance on groundwater overdraft. These investments include:

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- Two major surface water treatment plants designed to treat and optimize CAP water.
- Extensive recharge facilities and long-term storage credits to responsibly manage supplies.
- The Central Mesa Reuse Pipeline to maximize beneficial reuse and reduce system inefficiencies.
- Advanced metering infrastructure, conservation programming, and water efficiency measures.
- Regional interconnections to strengthen operational resilience.

These investments were undertaken in good faith reliance on the stability of Compact-compliant operations and coordinated federal reservoir management.

Mesa has profound respect for the Colorado River, for the Bureau of Reclamation, for the sovereign Tribal nations, states, and communities that depend on it, and for the collaborative work required to stabilize the system. Mesa has consistently invested in conservation, operational efficiency, groundwater recharge, and beneficial reuse to ensure that every acre-foot is used responsibly and that Arizona remains a constructive basin partner.

The DEIS does not adequately account for the economic, infrastructure, environmental, and municipal planning consequences that would result from the scale of reductions modeled under all provided alternatives.

**I. The DEIS Fails to Fully Analyze Municipal and Economic Impacts to Mesa**

The DEIS acknowledges potential reductions to CAP deliveries but does not evaluate the detrimental cascading consequences to municipal providers that have structured their infrastructure, regulatory compliance, and economic development around renewable Colorado River supplies.

For Mesa, substantial reductions to Colorado River deliveries would:

• **Compromise system reliability and operational flexibility**, particularly during peak summer demand and extreme heat events, while disrupting renewable supply assumptions underlying key infrastructure projects such as the Central Mesa Reuse Pipeline and Gila River Indian Community (GRIC) exchange.

• **Force increased groundwater dependence**, reversing decades of progress under Arizona's 1980 Groundwater Management Act, undermining recharge and long-term storage strategies, increasing risks of land subsidence and aquifer compaction, and destabilizing groundwater contamination plume management.

• **Jeopardize regulatory and planning frameworks**, including Mesa's Assured Water Supply designation and long-range growth management strategies that rely on renewable surface water supplies.

• **Adversely impact critical economic sectors**, including semiconductor manufacturing, aerospace and defense, advanced technology, data centers, healthcare, higher education, logistics, and regional employment centers that depend on reliable municipal water service.

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480.644.2175 (fax)

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• **Impose substantial financial burdens on water utility customers**, including emergency infrastructure retrofits, expanded treatment and pumping costs, accelerated capital investments, increased renewable augmentation expenses, and reduced municipal capacity to invest in conservation innovation and resilience initiatives.

Mesa and the State of Arizona host nationally significant semiconductor manufacturing, aerospace and defense production, advanced computing infrastructure, and emerging artificial intelligence technologies. Within Mesa, our major employment corridors include advanced manufacturing facilities, healthcare systems, higher education institutions, logistics hubs, and Mesa Gateway Airport. These corridors are directly served by Colorado River water delivered through the Central Arizona Project. The reliability of CAP supplies underpins municipal service to this strategic economic and critical infrastructure base. The DEIS does not meaningfully quantify or analyze the cascading economic, operational, public health, and national supply chain consequences that deep CAP curtailments would have on a city of Mesa's size and complexity.

The DEIS likewise fails to evaluate the physical and operational impacts of extended CAP dry-up scenarios on federal infrastructure. The 336-mile CAP aqueduct system was designed for continuous operation; prolonged dry conditions could cause deterioration of canal linings, pumping plants, high-voltage systems, and conveyance structures, resulting in substantial repair costs and multi-year service disruptions. These are reasonably foreseeable consequences that require evaluation under NEPA.

Several DEIS alternatives contemplate large delivery reductions that could fluctuate annually based on reservoir conditions, exposing municipal providers to abrupt and unprecedented year-to-year volatility. For Mesa, such high-magnitude reductions cannot be offset through rapid groundwater backfill, emergency well drilling, or fast-tracked infrastructure deployment. Water supply resiliency measures - including recharge expansion, advanced treatment, interconnections, importation agreements, and augmentation partnerships require years, often decades, of planning, permitting, financing, and construction. The DEIS does not analyze the feasibility constraints associated with replacing substantial renewable supplies within compressed timeframes.

Under NEPA, agencies must evaluate reasonably foreseeable environmental, economic, and social effects of proposed federal action, including impacts interrelated with environmental change. 42 U.S.C. § 4332(2)(C); 40 C.F.R. §§ 1502.16. Abrupt CAP reductions would foreseeably increase groundwater pumping, accelerate capital expenditures, raise energy and treatment costs, and destabilize municipal rate structures. Because the City sets water utility rates through multi-year financial planning to preserve affordability and stability, sudden high-magnitude curtailments would create rate shock and inequitable burdens on residents and employers who have already invested in conservation and infrastructure in reliance on coordinated federal operations. These fiscal and economic impacts are direct, foreseeable consequences of the proposed action and must be comprehensively analyzed in the Final EIS.

**II. The DEIS Does Not Adequately Address Compact Compliance and Delivery Obligations**

The Colorado River Compact is the foundational authority underlying reservoir operations. The DEIS repeatedly states that operations will be consistent with the Law of the River, yet it does not evaluate

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PO Box 1466
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how the proposed alternatives ensure compliance with Article III(c) and III(d) delivery obligations at Lees Ferry.

Given current hydrologic conditions and modeled storage trajectories, the possibility of Compact delivery tension is reasonably foreseeable. The DEIS should analyze:

- How each alternative performs under Compact-stress conditions.
- What operational mechanisms would be employed to avoid delivery deficits.
- How federal storage in Upper Basin reservoirs would be utilized to ensure compliance.
- The consequences to Lower Basin municipal providers if Compact compliance is not achieved.

Absent such analysis, the DEIS leaves municipal providers without clarity regarding the legal and operational foundation of future guidelines.

Mesa has placed Compact compliance at the forefront of its long-term water stability planning and infrastructure investment strategy. For decades, the City has structured its capital improvements, recharge programs, conservation investments, and reuse expansion around the foundational assumption that Colorado River operations would remain consistent with the Colorado River Compact and the Law of the River.

The DEIS does not sufficiently analyze whether the proposed alternatives ensure compliance with Articles III(c) and III(d) of the Colorado River Compact under reasonably foreseeable hydrologic stress. Given current reservoir elevations and modeled Compact Point 10-Year Flow Volumes, the risk of delivery tension, including the potential for flows at Lees Ferry to fall below 75 MAF, or below 82.5 MAF when Mexico Treaty obligations are considered, is foreseeable, not speculative. Yet the DEIS reports modeled flow outcomes without interpreting their legal significance under the Compact, fails to evaluate the reasonably foreseeable prospect of a Compact call, and does not clearly explain what operational mechanisms would be triggered to prevent delivery deficits. The omission of analysis regarding Upper Basin curtailment, releases from Upper Initial Units, or federal reservoir reoperations necessary to uphold delivery obligations represents a material deficiency under NEPA.

By failing to analyze Compact compliance in conjunction with the practical consequences of reversing decades of groundwater management progress, the DEIS implicitly assumes that municipal providers can absorb deep CAP reductions through increased groundwater pumping. That assumption disregards Arizona's groundwater management objectives and the reliance interests created by federal policy encouraging transition to renewable surface supplies.

The Bureau of Reclamation carries a nondiscretionary duty to operate federal infrastructure consistent with governing law. Municipal providers and millions of ratepayers have relied on the integrity and stability of those legal frameworks in making long-term investments. Compact compliance is not a discretionary policy preference - it is the legal foundation upon which coordinated operations rest. The Final EIS must explicitly evaluate how each alternative ensures delivery obligations are upheld and clearly articulate the legal and operational basis for maintaining Compact compliance without imposing

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disproportionate harm on municipal providers that have acted in good faith reliance on renewable surface supplies.

**III. The DEIS Does Not Fully Evaluate the Scope of Federal Authority Across the Basin**

The DEIS assumes significant authority to impose reductions in the Lower Basin while asserting limited authority with respect to Upper Basin consumptive use and CRSP storage operations.

Mesa urges Reclamation to more clearly articulate:

The DEIS contemplates releases from the Upper Initial Units primarily for infrastructure protection purposes rather than expressly for Compact compliance. Protecting reservoir elevations for hydropower or infrastructure cannot supersede mandatory Compact delivery obligations under federal statute. Failure to analyze reservoir operations consistent with Section 602(a)'s priority framework represents a material legal deficiency.

Section 602(a) of the Colorado River Basin Project Act directs the Secretary, in mandatory language, to store and release water from Colorado River Storage Project (CRSP) reservoirs in a specific order of priority: (1) deliveries to satisfy Mexican Treaty obligations under Article III(c); (2) deliveries to comply with Article III(d) Compact requirements; and only thereafter (3) releases necessary to avoid impairment of Upper Basin consumptive uses. The DEIS does not reconcile its modeling assumptions with this statutory order of priorities.

- The operational tools available within existing federal infrastructure,
- How CRSP storage units may be managed consistently with Compact delivery obligations,
- Whether shortage frameworks can be structured to equitably distribute risk across the Basin.

Any post-2026 framework that concentrates the entirety of mandatory reductions in one region while protecting continued growth assumptions in another region will intensify economic imbalance and undermine basin-wide stability.

In addition, the DEIS limits consideration of releases from the Upper Initial Units and other CRSP storage facilities in a manner that effectively concentrates reductions in the Lower Basin while preserving storage upstream. If Lower Basin states, particularly Arizona and municipal providers like the City of Mesa, that rely on CAP are bearing a disproportionate share of modeled reductions, then the burden of system stabilization should be shared across all available operational tools to the Bureau of Reclamation.

This includes fully evaluating the release of available federal storage, the use of coordinated steady-flow operations, and reservoir management strategies that prioritize delivery obligations rather than the continued accumulation of stored water in upstream facilities. The Bureau's authority over federal reservoirs is not limited to withholding water for elevation targets; it also includes managing the system in a manner consistent with Compact compliance and basin-wide equity.

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480.644.2175 (fax)

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The Colorado River Basin is one interconnected system. Storage decisions in one part of the basin directly affect delivery reliability in another. If reductions are required to stabilize the system, those reductions should not fall exclusively on one region while storage is preserved elsewhere. The hardship, conservation measures, voluntary reductions, and operational sacrifices already undertaken by the City of Mesa, CAP contractors, Tribal partners, and Lower Basin stakeholders represent a profound commitment to basin sustainability. That commitment must be reciprocated through operational frameworks that reflect shared responsibility.

**IV. The DEIS Does Not Fully Account for Environmental Consequences of CAP Reductions**

Reduced CAP deliveries would likely result in:

- Increased groundwater pumping and associated subsidence risks,
- Migration of groundwater contamination plumes in areas stabilized by reduced pumping,
- Increased energy use and treatment costs,
- Reduced landscape irrigation impacting urban heat mitigation and air quality,
- Potential PM-10 dust impacts in fallowed areas.

These are foreseeable environmental consequences in Central Arizona that are insufficiently evaluated in the DEIS.

Augmentation strategies cannot be deployed on timelines sufficient to offset sudden and substantial Colorado River reductions. In the interim, groundwater pumping would become the default mitigation strategy, accelerating aquifer decline and potentially reducing long-term groundwater reliability. The DEIS should evaluate these long-term structural aquifer risks as a core environmental consequence.

**V. Mesa's Infrastructure and Reliance Interests Merit Consideration**

Mesa's long-term water strategy has prioritized renewable supplies, recharge, reuse, and conservation. We have structured our capital planning around a renewable Colorado River component integrated with local groundwater management.

The DEIS does not address how sudden, large-scale structural reductions would affect:

- Existing federal subcontract reliability,
- Assured Water Supply determinations under Arizona law,
- Long-term infrastructure amortization,
- Municipal rate stability,
- Major capital projects currently underway or recently completed to improve Colorado River reliability and beneficial reuse (including the Central Mesa Reuse Pipeline / GRIC exchange and

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480.644.2175 (fax)

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expansion of the Signal Butte Water Treatment Plant) and the consequences of stranded investment if Colorado River deliveries are rapidly reduced.

The Final EIS should explicitly evaluate how proposed alternatives affect existing federal subcontract reliability, state Assured Water Supply determinations, and major capital investments undertaken in reliance on renewable Colorado River supplies.

**Summary**

The City of Mesa recognizes the severity of hydrologic decline in the Colorado River Basin and supports the development of durable, forward-looking operating guidelines. However, the DEIS as drafted, does not adequately evaluate the economic, environmental, legal, and municipal planning consequences of the modeled reductions to CAP deliveries.

The City of Mesa respectfully requests that the Final EIS:

1. Include a thorough evaluation of municipal economic and infrastructure impacts, including the consequences to large municipal providers that have made long-term capital investments in reliance on renewable Colorado River supplies.
2. Analyze Compact compliance under reasonably foreseeable hydrologic stress and clearly explain how delivery obligations at Lees Ferry will be upheld under each alternative.
3. Clearly articulate the operational and legal basis for basin-wide reduction frameworks, including how federal reservoir operations will be managed to ensure compliance with governing law.
4. Evaluate equitable shortage distribution mechanisms across both upper and lower basins so that reductions are not concentrated in a single region while other operational tools remain underutilized.
5. Strengthen analysis of environmental impacts resulting from reduced renewable supplies in Central Arizona, including aquifer impacts, subsidence risks, water quality consequences, and public health implications.
6. Prioritize a shared system responsibility framework that reflects the reality that the Colorado River Basin functions as one interconnected system and that drought response should be shared accordingly.
7. Fully evaluate the use of all available federal authorities, including coordinated operation of the Upper Initial Units, steady-flow release strategies, and reservoir management approaches that prioritize delivery reliability and Compact compliance over the preservation of stored volumes.
8. Consider operational strategies that reduce Upper Initial Unit storage to the minimum necessary levels during periods of severe shortage, when required to maintain equitable burden sharing of protecting federal infrastructure and protecting downstream municipal reliability.
9. Recognize and enforce that conservation requirements during significant drought conditions are a form of beneficial use and that basin-wide conservation expectations, applied equitably, strengthen long-term system stability and demonstrate collective respect for the river.

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480.644.2175 (fax)

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10. Acknowledge and evaluate municipal reliance interests, including billions of dollars in public infrastructure investments undertaken in good-faith reliance on coordinated federal reservoir management and Compact-compliant operations.

The City of Mesa supports the development of durable, consensus-based interstate and international agreements, developed with the engagement of Tribal sovereigns, as the foundation for post-2026 operations of Lake Powell and Lake Mead. Whether or not the Basin States ultimately reach consensus, Mesa urges Reclamation to consider operational pathways beyond those alternatives evaluated in the DEIS. As currently structured, the modeled alternatives present unacceptably high risks to large municipal providers such as the City of Mesa and do not adequately evaluate the full range of foreseeable municipal, economic, and infrastructure consequences.

The City of Mesa remains committed to responsible water management, conservation, and basin collaboration. We stand ready to work constructively with Reclamation and basin partners to develop an operational framework that protects critical infrastructure, respects the Compact, and sustains the communities that depend upon the Colorado River.

Sincerely,

Mark A. Freeman
Mayor| City of Mesa

480.644.2388 (tel)
480.644.2175 (fax)