



BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS
OF RIO BLANCO COUNTY, COLORADO
RIO BLANCO COUNTY HISTORIC COURTHOUSE
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February 27, 2026

U.S. Bureau of Reclamation
Attn: BCOO-1000
P.O. Box 61470
Boulder City, NV 89006

RE: Draft EIS Comments regarding Post-2026 Operational Guidelines and Strategies for Lake Powell and Lake Mead

Dear Acting Commissioner Cameron:

Please accept the comments of the Board of County Commissioners of Rio Blanco County, Colorado in response to Reclamation's Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) for Post-2026 Operational Guidelines and Strategies for Lake Powell and Lake Mead.

Like many Upper Basin communities and water users, we seek operational guidelines that restore system balance and provide long-term security for water users across the basin. Unfortunately, the 2007 Interim Operating Guidelines and subsequent emergency actions perpetuated structural imbalances and overuse instead of promoting lasting stability. Given climate-driven aridification and declining average flows, bold but lawful structural reforms are now required.

We believe that necessary reforms must be implemented in a manner consistent with the 1922 Colorado River Compact, the 1948 Upper Colorado River Basin Compact, and the broader Law of the River.

With this belief in mind, we support and agree with the Colorado River Water Conservation District's comments and specific recommendations. We strongly ask that you incorporate their suggestions and our immediate recommendation below, for further analysis and revisions during the development of the Final EIS.

Additionally, we'd like to emphasize the following points that are essential to the development of operating guidelines that achieve a long-term balance between supply and demand across the Colorado River Basin.

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Chairman

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Commissioner

Rio Blanco County Specific Comment: Quantifying hydrologic fluxes in an irrigated region characterized by groundwater return flows. A return flow study was conducted in the White River Basin to better understand the impacts of agricultural water use, specifically flood irrigation practices. The study found that approximately 75% of water diverted from the White River for flood irrigation returned to the river between July and November, as measured at the USGS streamflow gauge located just below the Town of Meeker.

The analysis further determined that return flows varied by river reach. Between Buford and the County Road 6 bridge, approximately 3.5 cubic feet per second (cfs) per river mile returned to the stream. Below County Road 6 to the Green Cabins bridge, approximately 5.6 cfs per river mile returned. From the Green Cabins bridge to the gage below Meeker, return flows averaged approximately 2.6 cfs per mile.

These findings demonstrate that agricultural beneficial use, particularly flood irrigation, extends viable flows in the White River during peak irrigation and high-demand periods and into the late season. Additionally, groundwater recharge associated with these irrigation practices significantly influences river temperature during the hottest months of the year.

The DEIS should consider, within its alternatives analysis, the necessity of fully understanding basin-specific groundwater hydrology in the Upper Basin. Evaluating only diverted consumptive use does not provide an accurate assessment of deliverable water to the Lower Basin.

Reclamation Must Prioritize Hydrologic Reality Over Predictability: The DEIS places undue emphasis on “predictability” for water users. Predictability cannot be achieved under future hydrologic conditions unless demands are permanently adjusted to align with reduced supply.

Flows in the Colorado River have declined approximately 20% over the past two decades and reservoir elevations remain critically low. The DEIS’ focus on predictability disproportionately favors Lower Basin users who rely on reservoir releases, while Upper Basin communities live with hydrologic variability and limited storage buffering.

The proposed federal action must focus on restoring long-term structural balance across the basin and performing under all ranges of hydrology, including critically dry conditions.

The Final EIS Must Evaluate and Adjust the Scale of Upper Basin Conservation: Several alternatives rely on assumed Upper Basin conservation volumes of up to 500,000 acre-feet annually. However, the DEIS does not analyze the reasonably foreseeable environmental and socioeconomic impacts required to achieve conservation at that scale.

In Upper Basin communities, conservation at these levels would likely require significant and sustained reductions in irrigated acreage and municipal uses and decreased economic activity.

Such reductions would have direct and potentially permanent impacts on:

- Agricultural economies and employment
- Rural tax bases and county revenues
- Habitat for aquatic and terrestrial species
- Community stability and small business viability

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These impacts must be analyzed programmatically and cumulatively under NEPA. Furthermore, the modeled conservation volumes exceed demonstrated program performance to date. The Final EIS should evaluate how alternative outcomes are impacted utilizing real world conservation program amounts.

Upper Basin Shortages Must Be Explicitly Disclosed: The DEIS repeatedly quantifies Lower Basin shortages in the main body of the document while relegating Upper Basin shortages to Appendix I.

Failure to clearly disclose these shortages in the main body of the EIS creates a misleading narrative regarding risk distribution across basins.

Lower Basin Water Use Must Account for System Losses: Approximately 1.5 million acre-feet annually represents system losses, including evaporation and transit losses. These losses are an integral part of Lower Basin consumptive use and should not be classified as “shortages.” Failure to account for these losses contributed to storage decline under the 2007 Interim Guidelines. No basin or contractor should be permitted to deplete water beyond legal apportionments unless Lake Powell is in full or flood-control conditions.

Lower Basin conservation water must be subject to realistic, recurring evaporation and transit loss accounting. One-time assessments are insufficient.

At Least One Alternative Must Perform Under Critically Dry Hydrology and Hydrology Must Drive Post-2026 Operations: None of the DEIS alternatives perform adequately under critically dry hydrology. Given declining natural flows at Lees Ferry and current reservoir elevations, at least one alternative must achieve performance metrics at least 90% of the time under critically dry conditions.

Additionally, operating regimes based solely on comparative reservoir elevations have failed to protect storage at Lake Powell. The Draft EIS must model realistic operations and its effects instead of allowing reservoirs to drop below critical elevations. This is critical for the public to understand and evaluate impacts of likely operations given current reservoir levels and hydrologic conditions.

Interbasin Transactions Must Not Be Allowed: The interstate compacts were designed to provide legal certainty and prevent interstate water marketing across basins. Interstate marketing mechanisms threaten Upper Basin water security, economic stability, and legal clarity. Colorado law also reflects a long-standing public policy limiting interstate export of waters of the state. We will not support any mechanism authorizing interstate or interbasin water marketing between the Upper and Lower Colorado River Basins.

Alternatives Must Contain Clearly Defined and Modeled Actions: The Basic Coordination Alternative includes non-specific actions above Lake Powell (i.e. in the Upper Basin) regarding additional reductions for infrastructure protection without modeling or clearly defining those triggers. These additional and unspecified actions must be disclosed and modeled to allow decision-makers and the public an opportunity to fully understand and assess the impact of these actions.

Similarly, the Supply Driven Alternative includes undefined “Gap Water,” with modeling assumptions that do not exclude Lower Basin system losses. The concept of “Gap Water” must be fully defined with disclosure on how often it is introduced to the system and the range of its magnitude.

Upper Basin Conservation Water and CRSP Upper Initial Units Water Must Remain in Lake Powell: If Upper Basin conservation is included, conserved water must be operationally neutral with respect to Lake Powell releases and Lower Basin shortage determinations. Conserved water should only be released at the direction of the Upper Colorado River Commission for Compact compliance or meaningful reservoir recovery.

Releases from CRSP Upper Initial Units for infrastructure protection must remain operationally neutral and remain in Lake Powell until sufficient system recovery occurs. Repeated modeled releases raise feasibility and NEPA concerns that must be analyzed.

In conclusion, Upper Basin communities bear hydrologic variability at the source of the Colorado River system. Our economies, agricultural base, infrastructure, and public services depend on legally consistent and hydrologically realistic operations.

We respectfully urge Reclamation to revise the DEIS to:

- Restore structural supply-demand balance;
- Fully analyze Upper Basin conservation impacts;
- Properly account for Lower Basin system losses;
- Ensure transparency in modeling;
- Include alternatives that perform under critically dry hydrology; and
- Honor the compacts and federal law.

Thank you for your full and fair consideration of these comments.

Sincerely,



Board of Commissioners of Rio
Blanco County, Colorado