

July 31, 2026

To: Readers of this Final EIS

Publication of this Final EIS comes at a crucial time in the modern history of the Colorado River Basin (Basin).

The need for sound water management strategies is of the utmost importance. The Colorado River Basin provides drinking water and power for over 40 million people, irrigation water for over 5 million acres of agricultural land and supports vital ecosystems across the seven Colorado River Basin states covering broad areas in the southwestern United States. In addition, on the other side of our southern border, two northern Mexico states rely on the Colorado River for essential municipal and agricultural water supplies. Several of the major reservoir- and water-management documents and agreements developed to guide Colorado River operations expire in 2026. The Secretary of the Interior, acting through the Bureau of Reclamation, proposes adoption of new guidelines and coordinated management strategies to address Lake Powell and Lake Mead through their full operating ranges to take effect when the current agreements expire in 2026. For the past 26 years, the Basin has been experiencing an unprecedented multi-decadal drought, resulting in historically low runoff and reservoir levels. During 2026, hydrologic conditions in the Basin have worsened; since publication of the Draft Environmental Impact Statement in January, it has become clear that the Basin will likely experience the lowest observed snowpack on record.

For decades, the Basin has relied on a reservoir system that has been able to buffer the impact of severe droughts by capturing and storing water during high flow periods. However, the extremely low hydrologic conditions over the past two and a half decades coupled with meeting water demands (albeit somewhat reduced by conservation and other activities) have resulted in very low conditions at the two largest reservoirs in the Basin, Lake Mead and Lake Powell. The combined contents of Lake Mead (behind Hoover Dam) and Lake Powell have not been this low since before Lake Powell began filling after the closure of the gates at Glen Canyon Dam in 1963.

Furthermore, current low Basin reservoir conditions, particularly at Lake Powell, have highlighted risks that could compromise the reliability and operational flexibility of Glen Canyon Dam that would affect the future ability to meet critical downstream water supply needs.

Since 2021, Colorado River operations have included a series of extraordinary operations designed to protect the infrastructure at Glen Canyon Dam and support continued reliable operations. Additional water from upstream reservoirs has been released to Lake Powell, and releases from Lake Powell to the Lower Basin have been reduced. This has been a coordinated and successful effort to date to keep Lake Powell above the critical elevation of 3,490 feet.

In the spring of this year, the Department of the Interior (Department) implemented unprecedented measures, including a decision to release 660,000 to 1 million acre-feet of additional flows from Flaming Gorge reservoir and reducing releases from Lake Powell to the Lower Basin down to 6 million acre-feet (a 1.5-million-acre-foot reduction). Despite all of these measures, due to the continued prolonged drought and water demands, the risk to the system has never been greater.

After a 2020 review of the preceding two decades of operations of Glen Canyon Dam and Hoover Dam, the Department began engaging the public to develop new operating guidelines that recognize the need to reduce water use in the Basin while protecting water delivery systems. Critical to this process, the Department and Bureau of Reclamation engaged extensively with the Basin States, Basin Tribes, and other

interested parties in pursuit of developing consensus-based long-term operational guidelines. Unfortunately, as of the publication of this Final Environmental Impact Statement, consensus on long-term operations has not been reached.

The Department published a Draft EIS in January 2026 because new operations must begin October 1, 2026. Due to the lack of consensus, the Draft EIS did not include a preferred alternative, preserving the opportunity for entities in the Colorado River to keep negotiating and reach consensus. In July, after another six months of negotiations since publication of the Draft EIS, no long-term consensus-based operation has been reached, and the Department must complete the NEPA process in order to have Colorado River operations in place for October 1, 2026.

The absence of a Basin consensus on water management strategies coupled with the ever-increasing hydrologic risk highlights the importance of the Secretary of the Interior's (Secretary) operational responsibilities under federal law to coordinate operations of Colorado River facilities and allow these facilities to meet their congressionally authorized purposes over the long term.

The Secretary has the statutory responsibility to make decisions about Colorado River operations that are based on actual hydrologic conditions, that consider conditions across the Basin as a whole, and that use flexible and responsive water management tools to protect operations at mainstem facilities, avoid operational risks to infrastructure at Glen Canyon Dam, and manage risks to the urban, agricultural, and natural systems that rely on the Colorado River. These responsibilities are particularly profound with reservoirs at historic low levels and declining river runoff anticipated to continue or worsen.

It is against this backdrop of hydrologic risk and lack of consensus that the Secretary has prepared the Preferred Alternative contained in this Final EIS for operations of Glen Canyon and Hoover Dams. The Preferred Alternative establishes an adaptive decision framework that will be used to develop operating guidelines that are designed to ensure reliable operations while being able to respond to changing conditions over a 10-year period.

The Preferred Alternative establishes a wide range of operations that provides the flexibility to develop specific operating guidelines within the 10-year period while preserving the opportunity for Basin negotiations to continue and, if successful, be incorporated in future operations.

The need for a flexible adaptive framework is clear given the history of the Basin since 2000. As reservoir elevations continued to fall and risk continued to increase, a series of interdependent agreements involving local, State, tribal and federal governments, water users and non-governmental organizations in both the United States and Mexico have enabled the system to operate by negotiated agreement rather than court determinations. Agreements have often included voluntary conservation programs and activities, demonstrating the capacity of the Basin to take necessary and innovative action to benefit reservoir storage. Today, Lake Mead is approximately 150 feet higher because of these agreements, and more conservation is planned in the coming years.

Maintaining the ability to negotiate and implement a consensus-based alternative remains a priority because a consensus-based solution is the most reliable way to ensure that operations balance the differing needs of water users across the entire Basin. This is particularly true as poor hydrology and reduced reservoir storage exacerbate longstanding disputes among Colorado River water users.

However, given the lack of consensus to date, decisions still need to be made for operations in the coming water year beginning October 1, 2026. The Preferred Alternative provides for flexible operations while creating opportunities for Basin entities to work together to achieve lasting Basin-wide solutions centered around cooperation, innovation, and partnerships.