



Coalition Calls Upon Colorado River Water Managers to Embrace Severity of Climate Crisis Amid Federal Forecasting Exercise

In anticipation of the Bureau of Reclamation's 24-month water forecast on the Colorado River, a coalition of nonprofit organizations is calling for more focus on the climate crisis in managing Colorado River water supplies.

The Bureau's forthcoming August 24-month study is a key benchmark for managing the nation's two largest reservoirs – Lake Mead and Lake Powell – but this annual exercise continues to be a problematic endeavor that creates false hopes and unrealistic expectations for the 1 in 10 Americans who live in the Colorado River Basin.

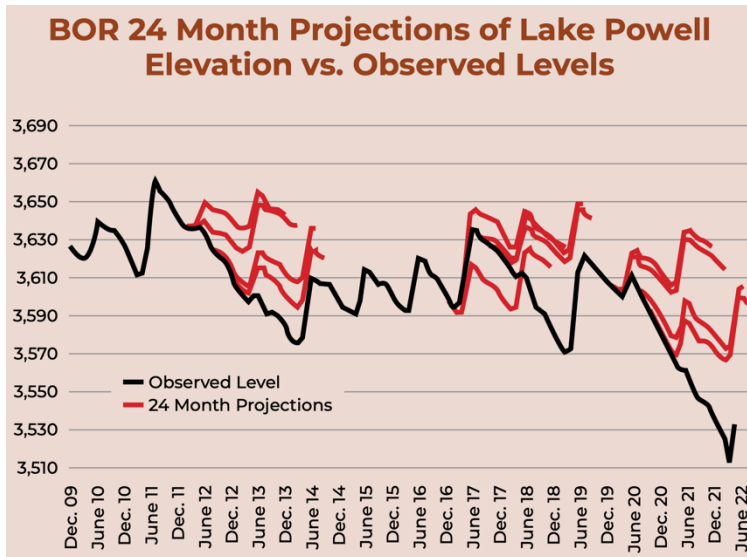
The coalition — Glen Canyon Institute, Great Basin Water Network, Utah Rivers Council and Living Rivers the Colorado River Waterkeeper — is calling on the Bureau and water managers to do more to plan for a drastically drier future.

"The Bureau's rosy projections send the wrong message to the public during the hottest 12-month stretch on record," said Kyle Roerink, executive director of the Great Basin Water Network. **"The federal government's short-term reports create a negative feedback loop that papers over the likelihood of forthcoming dry water years and doubles down on pie-in-the-sky thinking for reservoir management."**

"The Bureau is telling us to expect more big winters, but the data shows the Bureau keeps overestimating future flows" said Eric Balken, Executive Director of the Glen Canyon Institute. **"One or two bad winters and we are back in crisis mode at Powell and Mead. That is the real story."**

Many of the Bureau's 24-month projections on the Colorado River have drastically over-estimated future Colorado River water flows, particularly during low flow periods. Climate change is lowering river flows as winter snowpacks are shrinking in the face of warmer winters.

"We are playing with loaded dice," said Zach Frankel, executive director of the Utah Rivers Council. **"The big winter of 2023 created the misconception that reservoir levels were going to rebound, but America's two largest reservoirs are only ~37% full. That's like winning the lottery and still being bankrupt."**



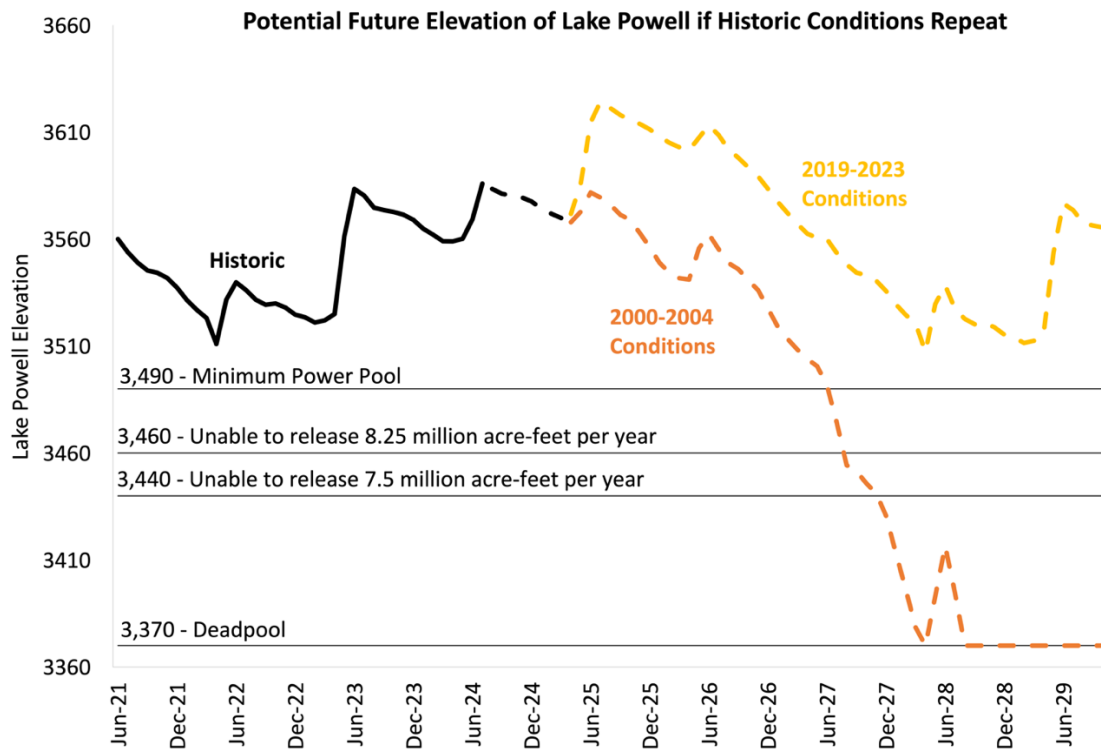
This chart – made from data from the Center for Colorado River Studies White Paper #7 – highlights the Bureau of Reclamation’s overly-optimistic 24-month projections at Lake Powell (in red) vs actual reservoir levels (in black).

Average flows on the Colorado River since the year 2000 are about [20 percent lower than the last century](#) — with the nation’s top scientists predicting that climate change could reduce water flows an additional 20 percent in the future. After a near-record runoff in 2023, [the runoff projections](#) for the 2024 water year estimate that natural flows at Lees Ferry will hover at or below the 21st century average.

Many water leaders are procrastinating preparing for the severe impacts of climate change by failing to acknowledge the scope of severity which shrinking snowpacks are causing to the water supply of 1 in 10 Americans.

If the drying trends continue, Lake Powell is likely to shrink further in coming years and drop below minimum hydropower generation levels, creating a water supply crisis that is not being addressed. If Powell reservoir levels drop to 3,490 feet, the seldom-used river outlet works – a set of four small, [recently damaged](#) tubes – must deliver water to Lower Basin residents. At low reservoir levels this set of pipes [cannot sustain the Upper Basin’s requirement](#) to deliver 8.2 million acre-feet to Arizona, California and Nevada, in addition to supporting the aquatic ecosystem of the Grand Canyon.

The coalition produced a hypothetical forecast showing what could happen to Lake Powell water levels in the next five years if we experience several dry years similar to the drought years of 2019-2023 (yellow) or 2000-2004 (orange). The forecast also assumes that the Bureau would make similar management decisions, like how much water to release from Lake Powell, in the future as they did in each past historical period. The forecast shows Powell water levels hovering below or slightly above minimum power generation levels.



Not solving Glen Canyon’s plumbing problems threatens to cause even greater drops to Lake Mead water levels moving forward because they must keep Lake Powell water levels higher to avoid having to use the River Outlet Works. Since dropping Lake Mead levels means increased water cuts to lower basin states, this means procrastinating solving Glen Canyon’s plumbing problems could lead directly to water supply reductions in Arizona, Nevada and California.

The coalition is calling for immediate investment for modifications to Glen Canyon Dam to ensure water can reach downstream cities like Las Vegas, Phoenix, and Los Angeles in future dry years. Such modifications will take some 10 years to implement, meaning that postponing a solution to this plumbing crisis only kicks the problem to a future White House.

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