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Congress of the United States
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COMMITTEE
HOUSE APPROPRIATIONS

SUBCOMMITTEE ON
ENERGY & WATER DEVELOPMENT,
AND RELATED AGENCIES

SUBCOMMITTEE ON
INTERIOR, ENVIRONMENT,
AND RELATED AGENCIES

SUBCOMMITTEE ON
MILITARY CONSTRUCTION,
VETERANS AFFAIRS AND RELATED AGENCIES

January 31, 2023

President Joseph R. Biden, Jr.
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear President Biden:

We welcome yesterday's announcement that six of the seven Colorado River Basin states have jointly reached and recommended a Consensus Based Modeling Alternative for the Department of the Interior (DOI) to consider in the NEPA analysis related to updating federal operating guidelines to protect the Colorado River System. The future of the Colorado River and its reservoirs — and, in turn, of the roughly 40 million people across the seven basin states, Tribal Nations, and Mexico who rely on them — now depends more than ever on your administration acting swiftly to advance the environmental review process aimed at implementing consensus-based solutions.

The American West is in crisis. Our region remains firmly in the grip of a megadrought that first took hold at the turn of the century and continues to squeeze our states dry. It is the worst drought the area has experienced in more than 1,200 years. The people in our districts and in our states depend on the Colorado River to sustain their lives and livelihoods. Recent precipitation throughout the West has provided welcome but fleeting relief. Startlingly low water levels persist at Lake Mead and the other reservoirs across the Colorado River Basin. They are projected to fall lower still in the coming years, threatening to deprive all whom they serve of the drinking water, hydropower, agricultural, and recreational opportunities that these resources have so long provided.

Last June, the historic nature and increasing urgency of the Western water crisis prompted DOI to call upon the seven basin states to come together and develop a plan to collectively reduce water use by two to four million acre-feet each year. Considerable work still remains to advance the six-state proposal toward implementation. DOI must do everything within its power to shepherd this jointly authored proposal expeditiously through its own decision-making processes as well as work quickly to fill in any critical gaps where interstate, Tribal, and international agreement continues to prove elusive.

We now know that, with current levels of water use, there may soon be limited water with which water rights can even be exercised. As Southern Nevada Water Authority General Manager John Entsminger has put it: "I'm a big believer in the law. But I'm an even bigger believer in math."ⁱ

At the beginning of this week, the elevation of Lake Powell stood at 3,523 feet.ⁱⁱ Imagine the very real possibility of this key reservoir dropping below the minimum power pool elevation of 3,490 feet — a scenario recently described in detail by *The Washington Post*:

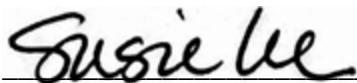
The normally placid Lake Powell, the nation's second-largest reservoir, could suddenly transform into something resembling a funnel, with water circling the openings, the dam's operators say.

If that happens, the massive turbines that generate electricity for 4.5 million people would have to shut down — after nearly 60 years of use — or risk destruction from air bubbles. The only outlet for Colorado River water from the dam would then be a set of smaller, deeper and rarely used bypass tubes with a far more limited ability to pass water downstream to the Grand Canyon and the cities and farms in Arizona, Nevada and California.

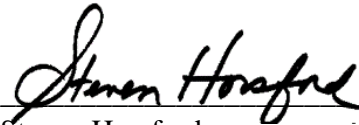
Such an outcome — known as a “minimum power pool” — was once unfathomable here. Now, the federal government projects that day could come as soon as July.ⁱⁱⁱ

The Colorado River crisis is one that affects upwards of 10 percent of the population of the United States as well as millions more in Mexico. It is time for federal water managers to act to safeguard the Colorado River System, and the Consensus Based Modeling Alternative provides a roadmap to avoid devastating economic impacts while sharing in the sacrifice of adapting to a permanently reduced water supply. We urge your administration to move with all possible speed in taking the necessary steps pursuant to DOI's authority under applicable federal law to help advance and refine this proposal — and, in doing so, save a vital national and international resource and secure a sustainable future for all in the Colorado River Basin.

Sincerely,



Susie Lee
Member of Congress



Steven Horsford
Member of Congress



Debbie Lesko
Member of Congress



Greg Stanton
Member of Congress

CC: The Honorable Deb Haaland, Secretary, Department of the Interior

The Honorable Camille Touton, Commissioner, Bureau of Reclamation

Dr. Kristen Averyt, Director for Drought and Western Resilience, White House Council on Environmental Quality

ⁱ Lochhead, Colton. “Las Vegas water boss urges states to take action to keep lakes from crashing.” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, 15 Dec. 2022, <https://www.reviewjournal.com/news/politics-and-government/las-vegas-water-boss-urges-states-to-take-action-to-keep-lakes-from-crashing-2695166>. Accessed 30 Jan. 2023.

ⁱⁱ *Water Summary*. Lake Powell Water Database, <https://lakepowell.water-data.com>. Accessed 20 Jan. 2023.

ⁱⁱⁱ Partlow, Joshua. “Officials fear ‘complete doomsday scenario’ for drought-stricken Colorado River.” *The Washington Post*, 1 Dec. 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-environment/2022/12/01/drought-colorado-river-lake-powell>. Accessed 30 Jan. 2023.