

Post-2026 Colorado River Reservoir Operational Strategies for Lake Powell and Lake Mead Narrative of National Environmental Policy Act Alternatives

Approach to Alternative Development

- Features of all action alternatives will ensure a broad range of alternatives for analysis. Reclamation's goal for the post-2026 process is to allow for the adoption of specific guidelines for the coordinated reservoir management of Lake Powell and Lake Mead through their full operating range and to provide for the sustainable management of the Colorado River system and its resources under a wide range of potential future system and hydrologic conditions.
- An operating plan must be in place by August 2026. We are sharing the five alternatives now as a voluntary step in the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process to enhance transparency and create a framework for a realistic and fair path for Colorado River Basin states, Tribes, and non-governmental organizations to continue to work toward a consensus agreement that protects the stability and sustainability of the Colorado River System into the future.
- Releasing the alternatives in advance of publishing the draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) affords the public and affected water users more information about the process and provides greater opportunities for collaboration, to ensure that we have a plan in place before the current guidelines expire.

Concepts Common to All Alternatives

- All alternatives will undergo a detailed analysis of impacts on the natural and human environment as necessary to develop a Draft EIS. The analysis will also compare the performance of alternatives over a common set of key hydrologic metrics including reservoir elevations, water use and reductions, and deviations from Glen Canyon objective releases, pursuant to the Long-Range Operating Criteria (LROC).
- Releases from Lake Powell may be less than the specified release below elevation 3,490 ft due to Glen Canyon Dam infrastructure limitations.
- Additional Lower Basin shortages (and potential additional reductions in water deliveries to Mexico) may be necessary under future hydrologic scenarios where Lake Mead reaches dead pool.
- As in the 2001 and 2007 Guidelines, the Secretary retains all applicable authority to respond to exigent and emergency conditions.
- The determination of deliveries to Mexico is not a part of the proposed federal action. Any such determination would be made in accordance with the 1944 Treaty. Nevertheless, modeling assumptions with respect to the distribution of shortages for the Lower Division States include operationally aligned water delivery reductions to Mexico in order to analyze potential impacts to hydrologic and other environmental resources. Shortage amounts described are amounts of total shortage, including Mexico. Modeling assumptions that identify water deliveries to Mexico pursuant to the 1944 Treaty with Mexico would be developed after all necessary and appropriate discussions have been completed with the United States International Boundary and Water Commission in consultation with the Department of State.

Description of Alternatives

No Action

- The No Action does not meet the purpose of and need for the federal action, but it is included as a requirement of NEPA.
- Operations would revert to annual determinations announced through the Annual Operating Plan (AOP) process.
- Lake Powell release would be 8.23 maf unless a higher release is required for equalization or a lower release results from Glen Canyon Dam infrastructure limitations.
- Shortages to the Lower Basin would be based on priority and reach a maximum of 600 kaf.
- This would not represent a continuation of current operations but is generally based on the pre-existing operating guidance that was in place before the adoption of the 2007 Interim Guidelines Record of Decision (ROD), and thus includes no specific activities above Lake Powell beyond existing authorities (e.g., to make emergency releases from Colorado River Storage Project (CRSP) Initial Units to protect infrastructure at Glen Canyon Dam).
- Existing Intentionally Created Surplus (ICS) would be delivered in accordance with existing agreements, but there would be no new delivery and storage mechanisms.

Alternative 1: Federal Authorities

- This alternative is designed to achieve robust protection of critical infrastructure within the Department and Reclamation's current statutory authorities and absent new stakeholder agreements.
- Lake Powell releases would be determined based on Lake Powell elevations, unless equalization releases are required. Lake Powell releases would range from 9.5 to 5.0 maf. Releases could be less than 5.0 maf, and Lake Powell elevations could be increased by CRSP Initial Units, to protect infrastructure at Glen Canyon Dam.
- Lower Basin shortages of up to 3.5 maf would be distributed consistent with the priority system and would be triggered based on combined storage in Lake Powell and Lake Mead.
- Existing ICS (Intentionally Created Surplus) would be delivered in accordance with existing agreements, but there would be no new delivery and storage mechanisms.
- There would be explicit accounting of unused/undeveloped quantified Tribal water.

Alternative 2: Federal Authorities Hybrid

- This alternative is designed based on proposals and concepts from Tribal Nations, federal agencies, and other stakeholders to achieve robust protection of critical infrastructure while benefiting key resources (e.g., natural, hydropower and recreation) through a new approach to distributing storage between Lake Powell and Lake Mead that enhances the reservoirs' ability to support the Basin.
- Lake Powell releases would be determined based on a combination of Lake Powell and Lake Mead elevations, 10-year running-average hydrology, and Lower Basin deliveries. Lake Powell elevations could be increased by releases from CRSP Initial Units to protect infrastructure at Glen Canyon Dam.
- This alternative would include new delivery and storage mechanisms for Lake Powell and Lake Mead with federal and non-federal storage pools and maximum flexibilities for all users. The

operations incorporate Basin-wide shared contributions to the sustainability of the system, including Upper Basin conservation that would be stored in Lake Powell and Lower Basin shortages starting at 1.5 maf, which exceeds average annual evaporative and system losses at and below Lake Mead, and reaching a maximum of 3.5 maf.

- Shortages would be triggered by combined seven-reservoir storage and distributed pro-rata.
- There would be explicit accounting of unused/undeveloped quantified Tribal water.
- Some elements of this alternative would require additional federal statutory authorities and stakeholder agreements.

Alternative 3: Cooperative Conservation

- This alternative is informed by a proposal submitted by a consortium of conservation organizations with the goal of stabilizing system storage, integrating stewardship and mitigation strategies of Lakes Powell and Mead, maintaining opportunities for binational cooperative measures, incentivizing water conservation, and designing flexible water management strategies.
- Lake Powell releases would range from 11.0 maf to 5.0 maf and would be determined by total Upper Basin system storage and recent hydrology. Releases would switch to “run-of-river” when Lake Powell is at 3,510 ft or lower. The operations incorporate Basin-wide shared contributions to sustain system integrity, including up to 4.0 maf of shortages in the Lower Basin triggered by combined seven-reservoir storage and recent hydrology, and voluntary water contributions from both basins.
- Some elements of this alternative would require additional federal authorities and stakeholder agreements.

Alternative 4: Basin Hybrid

- This alternative is designed to reflect components from the proposals and concepts submitted by the Upper Division States, Lower Division States, and Tribal Nations to present elements that could provide a basis for coordinated operations and may facilitate greater agreement across the Basin.
- Lake Powell releases would be determined primarily based on Lake Powell elevation with consideration in some scenarios of Lake Mead elevation. Releases would range from 12.0 to 5.0 maf. Lake Powell elevations could be increased by releases from CRSP Initial Units to protect infrastructure at Glen Canyon Dam.
- This alternative would include new delivery and storage mechanisms for Lake Powell and Lake Mead, including incentivizing conservation and managing/offsetting reductions, to afford the Tribal and non-Tribal entities the same ability to use these mechanisms. The operations incorporate Basin-wide shared contributions, including Upper Basin conservation that would be stored in Lake Powell and up to 2.1 maf of Lower Basin shortages triggered by combined seven-reservoir storage.
- This alternative would analyze shortage distribution using two approaches: priority and pro-rata, both of which would be analyzed with and without shortages to Tribes.
- There would be explicit accounting of unused/undeveloped quantified Tribal water.
- Some elements of this alternative would require additional federal authorities and stakeholder agreements.