



Aerial view of the Colorado River, near Parshall, Colorado in September 2020. (Photo: Mitch Tobin, The Water Desk)

# Reflections: The Colorado River Is Not Waiting

by Sharon B. Megdal  
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The week of August 15 was full of news about the Colorado River. As announced by US Bureau of Reclamation Commissioner Camille Calimlim Touton in mid-June, Monday, August 15, was the deadline for the seven basin states to submit their proposal(s) for accomplishing the targeted two-to-four million acre feet of additional basin-wide cutbacks. The deadline passed without agreement among the states on a plan. On August 16, Reclamation released its **Colorado River Basin August 2022 24-Month Study**. Based on projected river conditions, a Tier 2a shortage was announced for January 2023. For Central Arizona, this means deeper cuts in water deliveries by the Central Arizona Project.

As would be expected, the news media were active, and I had the opportunity to speak with several outlets. I will not attempt to summarize the news of the week; instead, I refer you to the short summary **story** included in the Water Resources Research Center's August 19 Weekly Wave.

Regarding expectations, most stakeholders anticipated more on August 16 than Reclamation's declaration of a Tier 2a shortage, which follows from current regulations, specifically the **2007 Interim Shortage Sharing Guidelines** and the **Lower Basin Drought Contingency Plan**. The announced water delivery curtailments will be just 108,000 acre feet beyond the cuts that were effective in 2022. The split is as follows: 80,000 acre feet are cut from the Central Arizona Project; 4,000 acre feet are cut from Nevada; and Mexico's additional delivery cut is 24,000 acre feet. When asked about the millions of acre feet in cuts that Reclamation asked for in June, officials spoke about continuing to work with all Colorado River water users. No deadlines were announced by Reclamation, nor did the agency announce any refinement of the reduction target.

It's not surprising that the parties were unable to come to agreement on a plan in two months. The June request was unprecedented in terms of the size of water delivery cutbacks and the time frame for achieving consensus. Had Reclamation announced unilateral plans, as some were expecting, there likely would have been a rush to the courthouse(s). I thought Reclamation might have given an idea of their thinking, asking the states to provide feedback, but they did not.

Conditions are constantly changing. For example, back in June, the funding now available through the Inflation Reduction Act was not in the picture. Though most negotiations are occurring in private, public statements by some parties suggest acrimony. The situation reminds me of how dialogue in Arizona became tense and acrimonious several years ago, during the early stages of discussions that led up to agreement on the terms of the Lower Basin Drought Contingency Plan (DCP). It looked like relationships were falling apart in Arizona, but Arizona got its act together. The parties got back on track and came to terms, though not quickly.

Now, however, time is of the essence. Basin-wide, we must get our act together soon. The Colorado River is not waiting.



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