

## Colorado River Authority of Utah Legislative Water Development Commission Presentation May 21, 2026

### **Interstate Negotiations:**

Discussions between the Basin States are still taking place while the federal government continues to develop a Draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) that would create a 10-year operating plan with prescribed water use reductions that would be reassessed every two years.

In the meantime, efforts are underway to prop up water elevations at Lake Powell by releasing up to 1 million acre-feet of water from Flaming Gorge for delivery to Powell. At the same time, water releases from Lake Powell are being reduced from a scheduled release of 7.48 million acre-feet to as low as 6 million acre-feet.

The Basin State discussions are at an impasse principally because the Lower Division States of Arizona, California, and Nevada are insisting on mandatory water use reductions by the Upper Division States of Utah, Colorado, Wyoming, and New Mexico. The Upper Division States (UDS) push back on this demand by pointing out that we already take mandatory water use reductions every time we have a drought year. The UDS have suggested bringing in a mediator to try and begin making progress again on a 7-State deal that could then be adopted into the EIS by the federal government.

### **Interstate Engagement: 25 Work Groups/Committees**

Additionally, Authority staff are engaged in 25 different interstate Colorado River work groups, committees, technical teams, forums and activities. These include work with:

1. Upper Colorado River Commission (UCRC)
2. Endangered fish recovery programs on the Upper Colorado River and San Juan
3. Glen Canyon Dam Adaptive Management Program
4. Salinity Control Forum

This work is time intensive and requires a substantial investment in understanding the issues each of these groups is working to address.

### **Advisory Councils**

The Authority has Five regional councils that currently operate across the state: Northern, Central, Southeast, Southwest, and Agricultural. Each is composed of water users, regional experts, topical specialists, and engaged citizens who care about the Colorado River. These councils serve as a deliberative forum for diverse perspectives.

One key development has been the Authority's ongoing collaboration with the newly formed legislative Colorado River Caucus, launched by Representative Scott Chew, comprising House and Senate members with districts inside or adjacent to the Colorado River Basin.

## **Advisory Council Recommendations to the Board for FY 2026**

At the beginning of 2026, the Advisory Councils provided specific recommendations to the Board on several key topics including:

### **Protecting Future Development Rights**

**Lower Basin Accountability and Uniform Measurement.** With the Central, Agricultural, and Southeast Councils calling for uniform measurement standards across all basin states for consumptive use and evaporation measurement.

### **Protecting Local Economies and Recreation with a particular focus on Lake Powell and Flaming Gorge**

### **Continued Tribal Engagement on all key Colorado River Discussions**

### **Working towards ecological resilience for Fish, Wildlife, Habitat and the Environment.**

**Agricultural Water Conservation with** the Ag Advisory Council making it clear that conservation commitments must remain voluntary, temporary, and adequately funded by the state or federal government.

**Provisional Accounting and Storage Frameworks.** The Northern Council strongly recommends establishing a viable Upper Basin storage and accounting framework so that conserved water can be credited to a Utah account and stored in Lake Powell.

**Innovative and Responsible Water Development.** The Southwest and Southeast Councils emphasized the importance of continuing local water storage, reuse, desalination, and augmentation projects to meet regional growth and future needs.

## **Intrastate Projects**

As we move into the Project Space, the Authority has 13 different intrastate projects in the works. Listing these by importance and investment:

### **Utah Demand Management Pilot Program**

The Utah Demand Management Pilot Program (DMPP) investigates the feasibility of temporary, voluntary, and compensated water conservation to meet downstream Colorado River Compact obligations. These types of proactive conservation initiatives, modeled after the DMPP, will be essential lifelines for our agricultural, energy, and municipal sectors.

Our goal is to balance water conservation with the needs of:

- Agriculture: Keeping Utah farmers in business.
- Municipalities: Protecting critical drinking water supplies.
- Energy & Environment: Ensuring water for power production, wildlife, and the environment.

### **Provisional Accounting**

The Bureau of Reclamation and the Upper Division States acting through the UCRC signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) in December 2024 allowing for the accounting of water conserved as a result of conservation and other qualifying activities in the Upper Basin. Utah will be seeking credit for water conserved and stored in Lake Powell.

**The Utah Diversion Measurement and Telemetry (UDMT) Program** is leveraging \$2.9 million in federal funds, as a collaborative initiative between the UCRC and the Colorado River Authority of Utah. Projects eligible to receive funding under the UDMT Program include source diversions, reservoir inflows and outflows, and return flows.

### **AG-DRIP: Agricultural Water Demonstration, Research, & Implementation Pilot Program**

The Agricultural Water Demonstration, Research, and Implementation Program (Ag-DRIP) is a 5-year irrigation research outreach pilot program, to promote sustainable water management practices in agriculture in the Colorado River Basin of Utah.

### **Stream Flow Instrumentation and Measurement**

The Authority, working through the UCRC, has leveraged over \$1.4 million in federal funding for the installation and operation of 12 USGS stream gages within the Colorado River System in Utah. UCRC's initial contract with USGS was amended to leverage an additional \$1.07 million of federal funding for the installation of 9 additional USGS

stream gages, over half of which support Utah Demand Management Pilot Program activities on the Price River.

### **Utah Colorado River Accounting and Forecasting Decision Support Tool**

UCRAF is a drought mitigation planning tool that is being developed to help the Authority understand the impacts and effectiveness of different drought mitigation actions such as changes in crop types, irrigation methods, water reduction methods, water right transfers, etc.

### **Utah Flux Network**

The Authority is partnering with the Utah Geological Survey to fund the Utah Flux Network, for measuring consumptive water use across the Colorado River system. By deploying Eddy Covariance (EC) stations, the network captures the highest-quality field-scale evapotranspiration data available. Network data is being used to ground-truth the larger scale, remotely sensed ET data from OpenET.

### **Snowpack, Runoff, & Operations Pilot Project & Research**

The Authority is conducting “Flakes, Flights, and Forecasts: Snow Measurement Enhancements in the Uinta Mountain Headwaters” as the first ASO Pilot Project in Utah. ASO uses airborne lidar technology to collect snow depth, snow water equivalent (SWE) and snow albedo measurements across entire watersheds over a three-year (2024-2026) period to better inform runoff forecasting.

**OpenET** is advancing consumptive use water measurement in the Colorado River system by providing a transparent, satellite-based platform for measuring evapotranspiration from field to basin scale. By utilizing remote sensing, the system offers a consistent analysis of the entire landscape, aligning the Authority's data with broader interstate measurement efforts.

### **Short, Mid and Long-Term River & Reservoir Operational Modeling**

Short- mid and long-term operational modeling of proposed actions at Lake Powell and Lake Mead was a key element in the Post-26 negotiations between the Basin States. Key tasks included an analysis of hydrologic shortage, refinement of the UDS alternative, simulation of initial alternatives released by Reclamation, analysis of the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) and independent modeling of Utah-specific concepts.

### **Climate & Hydrology Research & Instrumentation**

The Authority has a budget item to support emerging research when opportunities arise that directly support the Management Plan. Through the UCRC, IJJA funding has also

been identified to support data gathering and studies that facilitate implementation of the Upper Basin DCP.

### **Emery County Irrigation Efficiency Study**

As Utah and other Upper Division states evaluate ag water conservation projects, understanding the long-term trade-offs of irrigation efficiency enhancements across various temporal and spatial scales is critical. This study analyzes thirty years of historical data from Emery County to evaluate the impacts of transitioning from unlined canals to pressurized pipes and from flood irrigation to sprinklers.

### **Pelican Lake Subsurface Drip Irrigation Pilot Project**

The Pelican Lake Subsurface Drip Irrigation Pilot Project evaluates the tradeoffs of transitioning from center pivot to subsurface drip irrigation by comparing water consumption and crop yields between a converted study field and a traditional control field over three seasons.

