

EMBARGOED UNTIL October 28, 1:00 PM ET

Interior Department Initiates Significant Action to Protect Colorado River System *Proposal to revise operating guidelines one of several decisive steps underway to protect the System*

WASHINGTON – As collaborative work continues across the Colorado River Basin to address the ongoing drought crisis, the Department of the Interior today announced expedited steps to prepare new measures that, based on current and projected hydrologic conditions, are needed to improve and protect the long-term sustainability of the Colorado River System. To address the serious operational realities facing the System, the Bureau of Reclamation is initiating an expedited, supplemental process to revise the current interim operating guidelines for the operation of Glen Canyon and Hoover Dams in 2023 and 2024 in order to provide additional alternatives and measures needed to address the likelihood of continued low-runoff conditions across the Basin.

“The Interior Department continues to pursue a collaborative and consensus-based approach to addressing the drought crisis afflicting the West. At the same time, we are committed to taking prompt and decisive action necessary to protect the Colorado River System and all those who depend on it,” said Secretary Deb Haaland. “Revising the current interim operating guidelines for Glen Canyon and Hoover Dams represents one of many critical Departmental efforts underway to better protect the System in light of rapidly changing conditions in the Basin.”

Reclamation will publish a Notice of Intent (NOI) to prepare a Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (SEIS), which will include proposed alternatives to revise the December 2007 Record of Decision associated with the Colorado River Interim Guidelines. The 2007 Interim Guidelines provide operating criteria for Lake Powell and Lake Mead, including provisions designed to provide a greater degree of certainty to water users about timing and volumes of potential water delivery reductions for the Lower Basin States, and additional operating flexibility to conserve and store water in the system.

The NOI outlines that, in order to ensure that Glen Canyon Dam continues to operate under its intended design, Reclamation may need to modify current operations and reduce Glen Canyon Dam downstream releases, thereby impacting downstream riparian areas and reservoir elevations at Lake Mead. Additionally, in order to protect Hoover Dam operations, system integrity, and public health and safety, Reclamation may need to also modify current operations and reduce Hoover Dam downstream releases.

“We are taking immediate steps now to revise the operating guidelines to protect the Colorado River System and stabilize rapidly declining reservoir storage elevations,” said Reclamation Commissioner Camille Calimlim Touton. “Today’s action brings new ideas and necessary measures to the table as we consider alternatives to revise operations to better protect Colorado River System in the near term while we also continue to develop long-term, sustainable plans that reflect the climate-driven realities facing the Colorado River Basin.”

As described in the NOI, this SEIS will analyze alternatives including:

- **Framework Agreement Alternative:** This alternative would be developed as an additional consensus-based set of actions that would build on the existing framework for Colorado River Operations. This alternative would build on commitments and obligations developed by the Basin States, Tribes and non-governmental organizations as part of the 2019 Colorado River Drought Contingency Plan (DCP) Authorization Act.
- **Reservoir Operations Modification Alternative:** This alternative would be developed by Reclamation as a set of actions and measures adopted pursuant to Secretarial authority under applicable federal law. This alternative would also consider how the Secretary's authority could complement a consensus-based alternative that may not sufficiently mitigate current and projected risks to the Colorado River System reservoirs.
- **No Action:** The No Action Alternative will describe the continued implementation of existing agreements that control operations of Glen Canyon and Hoover Dams. These include the 2007 Interim Guidelines and agreements adopted pursuant to the 2019 DCP. Intensive ongoing efforts to achieve water conservation actions in the Basin are underway through a number of programs, including the recent Inflation Reduction Act. Implementation and effectiveness of these efforts will inform the assessment of existing operations and agreements.

The action announced today builds on steps announced in August 2022 as part of Reclamation's release of the Colorado River Basin August 2022 24-Month Study, as well as additional actions announced in September 2022 to reduce water consumption across the Basin in light of critically low water supplies and dire hydrological projections.

The Department also recently announced new drought mitigation funding opportunities to provide reliable, sustainable and equitable water and power supplies across the Basin. A newly created Lower Colorado River Basin System Conservation and Efficiency Program, funded with an initial allocation through the Inflation Reduction Act, will help increase water conservation, improve water efficiency, and prevent the System's reservoirs from falling to critically low elevations that would threaten water deliveries and power production. The Inflation Reduction Act includes \$4 billion in funding specifically for water management and conservation efforts in the Colorado River Basin and other areas experiencing similar levels of drought.

The NOI announced today to address immediate challenges does not interfere with Reclamation's separate process for determining post-2026 Colorado River Operations.

Members of the public interested in providing input on the SEIS can do so through December 20, 2022, per instructions in the *Federal Register* that will be published in the coming days.