

Department of the Interior Honors Environmental Leaders for Collaborative Effort to Protect Colorado River



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Interior Secretary Ken Salazar awarded representatives of Defenders of Wildlife, National Wildlife Federation, Pacific Institute, Sierra Club, Sonoran Institute, The Nature Conservancy, and others with the Department of the Interior's prestigious Partners in Conservation award, which recognizes significant conservation achievements made possible through partnering among diverse entities. This year's award honors the achievement of these organizations, the Colorado River basin states, Indian tribes, and other stakeholders for developing innovative strategies to manage Colorado River shortages, injecting flexibility into river management, improving the efficiency of water use, and also for turning these strategies into a clear set of guidelines. The final agreement was the culmination of several years of hard work, negotiation, and collaboration.

"We thank the Secretary for this award and look forward to further collaboration and partnership," said James Wechsler, of the Sierra Club's Southwest Waters Committee in Salt Lake City. "This award demonstrates that, when all interests are recognized and everyone works together, it is possible to meet population needs without sacrificing the remaining natural ecology of the iconic Colorado River."

The Colorado River is blockaded by over 30 dams, irrigates over three million acres, and provides water for more than 30 million people in the U.S. and Mexico. In the last few decades, the booming metropolitan West has increased human demand for water to the point where this demand nearly equals the river's average annual yield. These rising demands are colliding with regional drought and climate change. Access to a limited supply of water has been at the heart of conflict over the Colorado River. The on-going drought has exacerbated these tensions, leading to the threat of inter-state litigation and the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation's development of interim shortage guidelines for the river.

“The Bureau of Reclamation’s painstaking, collaborative efforts to craft a consensus shortage strategy generated tremendous good will and directly led to the biggest and most forward-thinking changes to river management in generations,” said Michael Cohen, senior associate at the Boulder, Colorado office of the Pacific Institute. “Unlike previous closed-door negotiations about the river and efforts to exclude environmental and other interests, this new shortage strategy welcomed all those with good and productive ideas; the river is the better for it.”

“Reclamation’s efforts to engage stakeholders, and stakeholders’ efforts to work with one another, highlight the potential that can be achieved when an agency joins public involvement and meaningful environmental analysis with policy development. We have been rewarded with a set of guidelines flexible enough to let in a ray of hope for the river in this changing environment,” said Kara Gillon, Senior Staff Attorney for Defenders of Wildlife.

The Colorado River Basin is in its ninth year of drought – the worst period in over a century. Reservoir elevations have declined significantly during this period, and climate experts expect global warming to decrease snowpack and the corresponding Colorado River flow in the future.

“One of the most exciting things to come out of the shortage guidelines, at the recommendation of the NGOs, was to leave the door open for Mexico and environmental interests to develop and store water for a variety of purposes, including restoration of the degraded Colorado River,” said Peter Culp, a partner at Squire, Sanders & Dempsey in Phoenix, who represented the Sonoran Institute during the shortage guideline discussions. “The NGOs’ collaboration with other water users on the development of the shortage guidelines also helped to develop trust and respect between the NGOs and other stakeholders, a foundation we’ve built on as we continue discussions about tapping into the potential for bi-national collaboration between the United States and Mexico.”

“Our collaboration led to new flexibility in river management, flexibility that will provide opportunities to extend limited water supplies, adapt to global warming, and help to protect and restore Colorado River habitat in the U.S. and Mexico,” noted Garrit Voggesser, Tribal Lands Program Manager in the Boulder, Colorado office of National Wildlife Federation. “This new opportunity could lead to real, measurable benefits for tribal restoration projects in the Colorado River delta, and more water for reaches of the river that are now dry.”

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