



WESTERN MAYORS CALL TO ACTION ON COLORADO RIVER

CHALLENGE

The climate crisis threatens water security across the world. Currently, arid environments cover over 30% of the world's land surface, a percentage that is set to increase with climate change in the coming century. Rising temperatures disrupt water cycles, leading to increasingly frequent, intense, and long-lasting droughts.

In the past 25 years we have seen [29% more drought-related disasters](#) than in the previous two decades. In addition, the [ten years](#) with the most acres burned from wildfires have all occurred since 2004, with the peak years occurring in 2015 and 2020. Finally, water scarcity in urban populations is [projected to increase](#) from 933 million people in 2016 to between 1.69 and 2.37 billion in 2050.

These arid regions face the complex, interrelated, and sometimes conflicting challenges of not only water scarcity, but also inadequate and aging infrastructure, increased costs, decreased revenue when water demand decreases, new regulatory requirements such as PFAS and lead service line replacements, rapidly growing populations and development pressure, and impacts on public health. Nowhere else is this challenge playing out more visibly than in the Colorado River system. This region is facing severe challenges with charting a new future and will need regional collaboration to move forward.

Cities are often left with solving the compounding impacts of these challenges and crises in their communities, which are impossible to solve without meaningful state and federal partnerships.

CLIMATE MAYORS REGIONAL COHORT

The *Climate Mayors Western Water Security Regional Cohort* was created to convene mayors in the western US states to uplift urban leadership in water conservation, and to address the complex and interrelated challenges associated with water insecurity. Cities are the economic and population centers of the Western United States, and threats to long-term water security must be managed concurrently with rapidly growing

populations, growth in emerging industries essential to the national economy and security, and public and natural ecosystem health.

Current water use levels and patterns across all sectors cannot be maintained in the face of increasing water scarcity due to climate change. These changes will require all water users to accelerate efforts to conserve water resources, enhance water distribution, build treatment and storage infrastructure, advance nature-based solutions, improve drought resilience, protect biodiversity, and identify funding to support these efforts to maintain water affordability for non-discretionary uses.

Cities recognize this urgency and are doing their part to reduce water use and increase water security. In 2022, communities across the West [signed the Colorado River Urban Water Providers Water Efficiency MOU](#), pledging to further reduce water consumption and increase reuse and recycling within their service areas. Signatories committed to actions such as expanding programs to increase indoor and outdoor water use efficiency and collaborating with other water users in the Colorado River basin to bring the supply and use of the river into balance.

Nature-based Solutions (NbS) offer powerful strategies for addressing water scarcity and climate risks. These solutions harness the power of ecosystems to improve water quality and increase water availability, while also providing numerous co-benefits for biodiversity, climate adaptation, and community health. By incorporating nature into water management practices, cities can reduce infrastructure costs, improve water quality, and enhance resilience to extreme weather events like floods and droughts. Implementing NbS not only addresses immediate water security challenges but also contributes to long-term sustainability by enhancing ecosystem health and supporting local livelihoods.

Cities are leading the way on building water security in the Colorado River system. By bringing demand into balance with supply, we are moving toward net-zero consumption of freshwater through a mix of policies and implementation measures that fit our local contexts, including:

- Minimizing water consumption
- Using alternative water sources
- Reducing wastewater discharge
- Returning water to the original source
- Using water efficiency measures
- Implementing efficient water management practices
- Recycling or reclaiming wastewater for beneficial uses
- Monitoring programmatic successes
- Developing or updating city appropriate sustainable water management targets with milestones and achievement dates

- Implementing water pricing incentives through effective water rate design
- Stormwater capture and reuse
- Using nature-based solutions to maximize benefits including stormwater infiltration and groundwater augmentation
- Desalination powered by renewable energy
- Regulations at the state and local level through service rules to restrict the way water is used
- Collaborating with new partners in the economic development and land use planning fields
- Educating and communicating around water security

Western mayors will continue to lead on actions to increase water security and inspire increased ambition from other cities, while asking for federal and state support for these initiatives and encouraging proportionate action across all sectors and levels of government.

CASE STUDIES: CITY SUCCESS STORIES

As mayors, we recognize that it is critical to set targets and measure against them. The cities below are examples of the types of ambition needed to mitigate this issue. We commit to affirming our existing targets and support others in developing their own based on what we have learned through this cohort.

- **Santa Monica, California:** The City of Santa Monica created a city goal of becoming 90% water self-sufficient by 2024. Following 2015 statewide emergency drought conditions, the City responded with an aggressive water conservation effort which yielded a 25% decrease in water demand and the need to develop a diverse, sustainable, and drought-resilient water supply. Their [Sustainable Water Infrastructure Project](#) is an award winning project that provides advanced treatment to both urban runoff and wastewater to offset potable water demand.
- **Los Angeles, California:** LA and LA County aim to build water security by achieving 70% local water by 2035 and 80% local water by 2045 in the city and county respectively. Water recycling, sustainable groundwater management, conservation and stormwater capture and infiltration targets have been developed.
- **Salt Lake City, Utah:** Since the year 2000, Salt Lake City has reduced overall water consumption by 30%, even while the population of the city has grown by over 15%. This is a result of persistent application of conservation programs that include incentives, regulation, rate design, long range planning, and policy coordination with state and federal agencies. Salt Lake City includes climate risk in

its long range planning to arrive at its conservation goals and are now developing a “Growing Water Smart” action plan to address the challenging and conflicting intersection of growth, climate risk, and water consumption through smart land use policies. This work will ensure conserved water is dedicated to the declining Great Salt Lake. Salt Lake City has also taken advantage of federal Bipartisan Infrastructure Law funding to meet regulatory obligations (\$39 million for Lead and Copper Rule revisions) and FEMA BRIC funding (\$37 million to replace and make resilient one of its water treatment facilities).

- **Phoenix, Arizona:** In 2024, Phoenix launched its Sustainable Desert Development Policy, including an ordinance that requires new users consuming larger amounts of water to submit and implement conservation plans, with a requirement for the largest water users to recycle at least 30% of their water use. Phoenix continues a 30-year trend of year-over-year reductions in water use – both per capita and overall – of nearly 34% during that period. Phoenix is pursuing a capital improvement agenda that will recycle all of its wastewater through Advanced Water Purification for use as drinking water by 2035, adding a new supply to its water resources portfolio.
- **Las Vegas, Nevada:** In 2021, Las Vegas, through the Nevada legislature, became the first city to ban “non-functional turf”. The ban applies to grass at office parks, in medians, and other low-use areas and is projected to save 9.5 billion gallons of water per year. The City is also leading in a municipal turf removal incentive that encourages the community to replace turf that is not affected by this law with alternatives— they have successfully incentivized the removal of roughly 200 million square feet of turf, saving more than 10% of Nevada’s Colorado River allocation. The restrictions in place in Las Vegas also include forbidding evaporative cooling systems in new buildings, issuing fines when water leaks onto sidewalks, prohibiting new homes from having pools larger than 600 square feet, and a moratorium on new golf courses while reducing water budgets for existing golf courses by nearly a third. Over the past two decades, Southern Nevada added about 750,000 residents while reducing Colorado River water consumption by 31%.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FEDERAL AND STATE ACTION

Federal and state resources will be necessary to continue to drive water resilience solutions, reduce water costs for consumers, invest in public-private water partnerships, and ensure future livelihoods of our residents and nearby agricultural communities. An all-of-government, cross-sector approach is needed to ensure the future of the West. The Cohort provides the following recommendations to improve water security:

Federal Priorities

- Invest additional funding to water and drought mitigation programs and water and wastewater infrastructure, including but not limited to:
 - WaterSMART Water Program
 - Low-income Household Water Assistance Program (LIHWAP) to help with rising costs of water associated with drought, climate risk, and infrastructure
 - Clean Water and Drinking Water State Revolving Funds
 - Water Infrastructure Finance and Innovation Act (WIFIA)
 - Bureau of Reclamation Title XVI Program
 - EPA Alternative Water Source Grants Program
- Restore FEMA Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities (BRIC) program
- End federal taxation of water conservation rebates, creating the same tax conditions that energy conservation rebates have enjoyed for years and encouraging conservation by reducing recipient costs and utility administrative burden
- Create block grant programs available to local governments and states to allow for flexible grant funding to increase water efficiency programs across the West (such as funding to create water leak monitoring programs, residential rebates, and more) – similar to the Energy Efficiency Block Grant Program
- The Department of Interior and Bureau of Reclamation should exert their authority to ensure sustainable management of the Colorado River system that strengthens water security for future generations; ongoing negotiations related to post-2026 Colorado River system operations must be based on the concept of permanent and proportionate measures for all sectors of water use
- Create a local government advisory commission or other official channel to include local government voices that represent communities in Western Water decisions
- Invest unobligated federal drought money to local and tribal governments for flexible water resilience use, such as: water recycling infrastructure, natural drought resiliency infrastructure, stormwater reuse projects, etc.
- Use Presidential Emergency Authority to designate drought conditions in the West as a natural disaster to initiate increased funding to vital communities

State Priorities

- Align and integrate local governments into state water and climate planning
- Collaborate with and integrate local governments into the upper and lower Colorado River basin negotiations, especially in instances in which they are the primary water rights holders

- Invest in state drought resiliency fund for water recycling infrastructure programs for local governments and farmers to reduce uptake of water from Colorado River Basin
- Regularly coordinate and convene state, local, agricultural, tribal, and private entities to address state water goals and identify cross-sectoral solutions as well as public-private partnerships and investments
- Allocate state funding and/or expertise to assist communities with 1) water infrastructure, such as smart meters and aging pipelines; 2) rate studies and rate design; 3) long range resiliency planning such as state water plans, land use plans, and economic development plans; and 4) conservation incentive programs
- Develop programs to help communities with revenue stabilization and water affordability as water demand decreases