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Bureau of Reclamation, Upper Colorado River Basin, Statement on the Approval of the 2023 Drought Response Operations Agreement (DROA) Plan

SALT LAKE CITY – On May 17th, the Upper Division States of Colorado, New Mexico, Utah, and Wyoming, acting through the Upper Colorado River Commission (UCRC), approved the 2023 Drought Response Operations Plan impacting reservoir operations of Flaming Gorge, Blue Mesa, and Lake Powell through April 2024. The plan is now submitted to Reclamation for approval and implementation. The plan takes advantage of the above-normal Colorado River flows this year to recover water that was released from Flaming Gorge and Blue Mesa reservoirs in 2021 and 2022 to protect critical elevations at Lake Powell. In total, Reclamation estimates that 588,000 acre-feet of storage will be recovered at Flaming Gorge Reservoir and 36,000 acre-feet recovered at Blue Mesa Reservoir.

Wyoming’s Commissioner Brandon Gebhart noted that with the focus on recovering DROA water to the upstream reservoirs, “The 2023 Plan shows how DROA is designed to work – loan water when needed to protect Lake Powell and repay the loan when flows are better.”

Colorado’s Commissioner Becky Mitchell added, “This year’s plan, with the inclusion of Tribes, improves on the process we started in 2022, and the focus on recovery shows we can meet the full commitments in DROA.”

Utah was represented by Amy Haas, the Executive Director of the Colorado River Authority of Utah. She noted that “...the plan benefited from close coordination between Reclamation, the States and Tribes to resolve the challenges of recovering DROA water to the upstream reservoirs.”

New Mexico’s representative, Estevan Lopez acknowledged the effort that went into the process, “I appreciate the hard work and close collaboration between Reclamation, Tribes, and States in preparing the plan, including discussions with the Lower Basin,” he said.

The United States Commissioner, Anne Castle, shared her perspective that the “DROA is designed to be flexible and adapt to the actual hydrology in the Upper Basin. In December we were expecting a very dry winter with dire predictions for reservoir levels. However, we have the very good fortune of pivoting to a very wet runoff and have adapted this plan to take advantage of the wet year to restore storage upstream of Lake Powell.”

The plan was developed through collaboration, engagement, and participation by Reclamation, Upper Division States, the Jicarilla Apache Nation, Navajo Nation, Southern Ute Indian Tribe, and Ute Mountain Ute Tribe, as well as water users and resource managers. The plan will adapt to changing conditions over the coming year as needed to respond to the actual hydrologic conditions, if necessary. The plan can be found here <http://www.ucrcommission.com/ucrc-adopts-2023-drought-response-operations-plan/>.