Upper Colorado
River Commission

NEWS RELEASE
October 8, 2025

Colorado River water supplies cut in Upper Basin

With Colorado River negotiations ongoing, Upper Division States continue to make sacrifices with uncompensated reductions to water users

SALT LAKE CITY — As the Upper Division States negotiate ways to equitably and sustainably manage the Colorado River's future supplies, their water users face the harsh reality of living within the river's 21st-century limits.

This year, in New Mexico, the San Juan Chama project received 31% of their normal Colorado River water supply, a 69% reduction, which is used by Albuquerque and Santa Fe, as well as for agricultural purposes.

"The San Juan-Chama Project contractors are absorbing unavoidable natural hydrologic shortages and have had to learn how to operate under constrained supplies, higher costs, and mounting climate pressures," said Diane Agnew, the Albuquerque-Bernalillo County Water Utility Authority's Water Rights Program Manager. "This ongoing uncertainty in water availability is placing significant strain on water users, challenging infrastructure investments, and disrupting water management strategies that are critical to our communities and economy."

In Colorado, the Dolores Water Conservancy District's water users faced cuts of up to 44%. Thousands of acres remain fallowed both on the Ute Farm & Ranch and north towards Dove Creek.

"Our farmers are left with year-by-year gambles with last-second planning going late into May and limiting farmers' abilities to make long-term, successful crop rotation planning," said Ken Curtis, GM of the Dolores Water Conservancy District. "The Dolores snowpack is disappearing, and the historic runoff has dropped by even greater magnitudes. Water is no longer reliably available."

2025 marks the fifth year out of the last eight years with shortages impacting the Conservancy District. Many acres have remained fallow since 2021, when available project water supplies dropped to zero. Local farmers did not have the time and resources to bring fields back into production prior to this current shortage — all of their shortages are uncompensated and involuntary.

The District supplies water to the Ute Mountain Ute Tribe's Farm and Ranch Enterprise. The Tribe was forced to turn off irrigation spigots to 60% of their land and lay off farm workers. The crop plan for 2025 only included the existing, high-value alfalfa needed to sustain the Farm & Ranch Enterprise [FRE].

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"We [FRE] are merely surviving, not adapting," said FRE irrigation manager Michael Vicente when responding to his view of the historic drought.

Severe water shortages in Utah's Uintah Basin, driven by Colorado River cuts, are forcing ranchers to reduce cattle herds, raising production costs and straining the local economy.

"Spring runoff was dismal at best. Early 1900s era water rights only received a week or two of natural flow delivery. Shortages were so severe that in some basins, they even affected senior 1861 water rights. These shortages are directly impacting cattle production," said Dan Larsen, Board Member at the Colorado River Authority of Utah. "Ranchers are being forced to cut back their herds, which not only raises costs for producers but also ripples through our entire local economy."

Hydrologic shortage is also impacting Utah's Demand Management Pilot Program, which is exploring voluntary, compensated water conservation in the Colorado River system in Utah. For example, the Central Utah Water Conservancy District enrolled 4,500 acre-feet of water in the program; however, the water rights held by the District were cut in priority on June 8, much earlier than the typical mid-summer cut, resulting in only around 900 acre-feet being delivered to the Program.

Agricultural producers are weighing potential impacts from hydrologic shortage on their operations as they consider participating in conservation-related pilot programs Nick Sampinos, a farmer along the Price River, said "Persistent drought conditions are a constant challenge, however, the Utah Demand Management Pilot Program has provided us with much needed assistance and set the stage for economic sustainability of our farming operation well into the future."

In Wyoming, historic drought and Colorado River shortages have driven the Black's Fork River down to a 1891 priority date, forcing the state to regulate off water rights to more than 52,000 irrigated acres in 2025 in that drainage alone.

"This year, more than 163,000 acres of irrigation were shut off in Wyoming's portion of the Green River Basin," said Kevin Payne, Division IV Superintendent of the Wyoming State Engineer's Office. "This is an extraordinary reduction with serious impacts on producers and rural communities across southwest Wyoming."

The Upper Basin has consistently used less than its legal entitlement through strict water administration. The four states of the Upper Basin remain committed to continued work in implementing and expanding water management initiatives, including accounting for conservation-related activities in 2026.

The Upper Basin's sacrifices aren't abstract; they carry real human and economic consequences. As Colorado River negotiations continue, Upper Basin leaders are clear: river operations must adapt to the actual supply and prioritize rebuilding storage to restore resiliency.

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About the Upper Colorado River Commission (UCRC):

The UCRC is an interstate administrative agency made up of duly appointed representatives from the four Upper Division States of Colorado, New Mexico, Utah and Wyoming.

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