Upper Colorado
River Commission

Real action puts the Upper Basin at the forefront of Colorado River solutions

With new agreements and programs and decades of responsible management, the Upper Basin is preparing for future Colorado River operations

SALT LAKE CITY — Oct. 28, 2025 — The Upper Colorado River Commission (UCRC) is highlighting the real and measurable actions being taken by the Upper Division States — Colorado, New Mexico, Utah and Wyoming — to live within the means of the Colorado River and secure a sustainable future. The Upper Basin is adapting to a drier, more variable river system.

The Upper Basin exemplifies responsible, supply-based water management through an innovative provisional accounting agreement with the Bureau of Reclamation, coupled with decades of intensive water management and uncompensated mandatory reductions. These actions lay a transparent foundation for post-2026 Colorado River operating rules.

For more than 20 years, the Upper Division States have taken real actions, including fulfilling Drought Contingency Plan commitments, modernizing measurement systems, accounting for and reporting of all consumptive uses, implementing aggressive conservation programs, supporting advancements in irrigation efficiency and enforcing mandatory reductions through strict water rights administration. These actions go beyond the obligations in the 1922 Colorado River Compact, reflecting a shared commitment to the long-term stability of the Colorado River.

The new provisional accounting framework, now underway across the Upper Basin, will enable transparent, real-time documentation of voluntary reductions. Moving forward, this technical backbone will ensure future river operations continue to be grounded in facts.

“The Upper Basin is developing solutions that work not only for the Upper Basin but for the entire Colorado River system,” said Chuck Cullom, UCRC Executive Director. “The Upper Basin states and water users are already taking verifiable, on-the-ground actions to live within the river’s means.”

State Leadership in Action

Colorado: Strategic Reductions and Long-Term Investments

Colorado is leading with deep, uncompensated reductions and forward-looking investments to continue to adapt its water systems to a drier future. Farmers and municipalities adjust operations to match real supply, while the state funds millions in watershed health and data-driven conservation programs. Highlights include:

- Investing $22 million in headwaters and watershed restoration.
- Launching a diversion measurement installation program, which will provide no-cost structures to increase accuracy and transparency in water use and management on the Western Slope.
- Committing $25 million in new CWCB conservation and resiliency grants and $110 million in Water Plan grants.
- Implementing strict water rights administration, with the Dolores Project operating at just 30% of normal supply, the Ute Mountain Ute Farm and Ranch Enterprise receiving only half its typical allocation and senior water rights dating to the 1800s being curtailed.
- Exploring temporary, voluntary, compensated conservation and strategic upstream releases.
- Reducing municipal demands through turf removal, water recycling, rate restructures, public education and aggressive conservation. Denver Water has seen more than a 40% reduction in residential per capita use and a 16% reduction in total deliveries despite growing more than 29% since 2000. Colorado Springs has seen a 41% reduction in residential per capita water use and about a 20% drop in total water deliveries despite growing 39% since 2000.

“Colorado water users are taking deeper cuts than required under the Compact. This is not because they’re being paid to, but because they must,” said Commissioner Becky Mitchell. “These are real impacts happening right now, and we’re coupling them with smart investments to prepare for the future.”

New Mexico: Innovative Partnerships and Data-Driven Leadership

New Mexico has long been at the forefront of adaptive management, integrating advanced measurement networks and modeling tools to support efficient operations and now provisional accounting projects. Highlights include:

- Jicarilla Apache Nation’s 20,000-acre-foot lease and strategic Navajo Reservoir releases (2024–2026) to balance flexibility and supply.
- Implementing the 2023 Water Security Planning Act for regional scarcity planning and funding prioritization.
- Establishing the Strategic Water Reserve statute to balance Compact deliveries and environmental needs.
- Installing a river measurement network and implementing Active Water Resource Management initiatives.
- Developing the San Juan RiverWare model to enable precise tracking of diversions, return flows and conservation gains.

- Municipal partners, including Albuquerque and Santa Fe, are leading the nation's urban conservation by achieving significant per-capita use reductions under a joint conservation MOU. Albuquerque has cut residential per-capita use by 32% and total deliveries by 17%, despite 40% population growth since 2000.

"New Mexico has built the partnerships and tools that make transparent management possible," said Commissioner Estevan Lopez. "We've been planning for a drier river for decades, and now we're implementing those tools to lead by example."

Utah: Operational Adaptation and Demand Reduction

Utah is aligning operations and policy to hydrologic conditions, applying provisional accounting principles to on-the-ground management. Highlights include:

- Launching a $5 million, two-year Demand Management Pilot Program in 2025-2026 to compensate agricultural producers for temporarily and voluntarily reducing consumptive use in the Colorado River system in Utah (estimated total conservation of ~20,000-30,000 acre-feet).
- Leveraging $1 billion state conservation appropriations to expand statewide turf conversion and municipal conservation programs: More than 7 million sq. ft. already converted, saving 200+ million gallons annually.
- Developing an operational accounting and forecasting model of the Colorado River and its subbasins in the state to serve as a planning tool to evaluate impacts of drought mitigation measures, including demand management based on actual supply.
- Employing state-of-the-art satellite-based, remote sensed Open ET data to measure consumptive water use from field to basin scale
- Pioneering the first Airborne Snow Observatories (ASO) flights in Utah in the Uintah Mountain headwaters to inform reliable water supply forecasting.
- Implementing a farm-scale subsurface drip irrigation (SDI) pilot program to compare water consumption of a study alfalfa field using SDI against a sprinkler irrigated field.
- Partnering with Utah State University and agricultural producers to develop irrigation management plans that identify suitable water conservation methods and programs for individual producers.

"Even our most senior users are taking deep cuts," said Commissioner Gene Shawcroft. "We're integrating provisional accounting into operations and moving toward rules rooted in reality, not history."

Wyoming: Conservation and Transparency at Scale

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Wyoming is demonstrating what large-scale, uncompensated reductions look like in practice while developing the technical foundation for provisional accounting and long-term conservation. Highlights include:

- In 2025, regulating off water rights to 164,000 acres, which were mandatory and uncompensated reductions.
- Enforcing necessary reductions even though Wyoming has only developed about 30% of what it was promised under the Compact.
- Securing $15 million in state and federal funding for consumptive use research and drought resilience.
- Coordinating releases from Fontenelle Reservoir in August 2025 to study transit losses in the Green River and to advance accurate water accounting.
- Promoting irrigation efficiency and long-term conservation across the Green River Basin.
- Pursuing legislation to implement a voluntary, compensated conservation program.
- Developing operational models for tracking and optimization of uses on the Upper Green River and tributaries.

“Wyoming’s regulation of water rights is real, mandatory and necessary when faced with dry hydrology,” said Commissioner Brandon Gebhart. “Wyoming has, and continues to investigate and implement, meaningful tools to help our water users and the entire system to deal with the hydrologic circumstances we are facing.”

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 — Colorado, New Mexico, Utah and Wyoming.

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