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Future of the Colorado River – Southwest Ag Summit

The Colorado River Basin is managed in a complex and multi-level legal structure that involves many stakeholders. The Colorado River watershed is divided into the Upper and Lower Basins. The Upper Basin includes the states of Wyoming, Colorado, Utah and New Mexico. The Lower Basin includes Arizona, California and Nevada. A binational treaty governs the releases to Mexico from the Colorado River.

Within the overall structure of the Law of the River, the basin states and the Boulder Canyon Project Act water contractors must work collectively to address their water supply issues. In the Lower Basin, water supplies are administered by a federal water master, designated by the Secretary of the Interior working through the Bureau of Reclamation. In the Upper Basin, the Upper Colorado River Commission serves in the role of administering compliance with the 1922 Colorado River Compact. In addition, every basin also has its own unique set of law governing rights that apply within those states.

The 2007 Interim Guidelines for Lower Basin Shortages and the Coordinated Operations for both Lake Powell and Lake Mead are set to expire in 2026. The seven Colorado River Basin states and stakeholders must work together to develop the new criteria that will replace those guidelines. At present, there is a gridlock in those negotiations between the Upper and Lower Basin states and it must be resolved in 2025 to replace those guidelines expiring in 2026.

As part of the 2025 SW Ag Summit program on Thursday, 20 February on the campus of Arizona Western College, two sessions will be held addressing the future of the Colorado River and management plans for water allocations that will be very important for agriculture in the lower Colorado River Valley in the next decade.

This will include a keynote session in the morning and a breakout session will follow. The schedule for these two sessions is listed below.

Keynote Program, 7:30 a.m., 20 February 2025, College Community Center (3C)

The Future of the Colorado River

- Jeff Silvertooth, University of Arizona
- Tom Buschatzke, Director at Arizona Department of Water Resources
- J.B. Hamby, Chairman of the Colorado River Board of California and Colorado River Commissioner

Breakout Session – Colorado River Update, 9:30 a.m. MAC 106

Outlook on Basin wide Negotiations for the 2026 Operational Guidelines

- Introduction – Jeff Silvertooth, Moderator, University of Arizona
- Colorado River Perspectives - Principal and Water User Discussion
 - Hank Auza, President, Yuma County Water Users Association
 - Elston Grubaugh, General Manager, Wellton-Mohawk Irrigation and Drainage District
 - J.B. Hamby, Chairman | Colorado River Board of California and Colorado River Commissioner | State of California
 - Tom Buschatzke, Director, Arizona Department of Water Resources

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